MAY/JUNE 2020

The American Conservative

IDEAS OVER IDEOLOGY • PRINCIPLES OVER PARTY

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DOWN *with* DECADENCE

How to fight American decadence in an age of pandemic

ROD DREHER *interviews* ROSS DOUTHAT

DANIEL MCCARTHY

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Josh Hawley Speaks for America's "Small Places"

In his maiden speech on the Senate floor, Missouri Senator Josh Hawley spoke up for the small places in America, like his hometown of Lexington. He said:

I come from a town called Lexington, Missouri. It's a small place, but a proud one. It's a place where people wake early and work late to make a life for themselves and their children. It's a place where people value honesty and gumption and life's simple pleasures: a fine morning in a deer stand, reading to the kids before bed, Sunday dinner at Mom's.

The United States is unique in history as a republic governed not by a select elite, but by the working man and woman.

It's time to face the facts. Over the last forty years, our economy has worked best for those at the top: the wealthy, the well-educated. If you have a job in Silicon Valley or an expensive and prestigious degree, this economy has worked for you.

And Washington has focused on how to get more people to join this elite.

But if you want a life built around the place where you grew up, if your ambition is not to start a tech business but to join the family business, to serve in the PTA or in your local church, well, you're told that you're not a success. And you're told that you're on your own.

Very few Americans leave the small places where they grow up. Almost 72% of them live close by their home-towns. What happens to them when government tips the scales toward mega-corporations at the expense of the mom and pop businesses powering America's small-town Main Streets?

Sen. Hawley calls it a crisis. He wrote in *The American Conservative*:

For thirty years or more, the policies of both parties have favored the wealthy and the well-educated who live in our mega-cities, and those who aspire to join them. But if your ambition is not to start a tech company but to work in the family business, to serve not on a corporate board but with the local PTA, Washington tells you that you don't matter and you're on your own.

As a consequence, the great American middle is facing a crisis—a loss of respect and work, the decline of home and family, an epidemic of loneliness and despair. This is the defining crisis of our time.

My wife Debbie and I travel for many weeks of the year through the small towns and cities between Maine and Florida. We have visited these same towns for decades, taking the temperature of the economy in support of the analysis at our family-run investment firm, Richard C. Young & Co., Ltd. (www.younginvestments.com).

Our consistent monitoring of America's Main Streets confirms Hawley's worst fears. They are boarded up, hollowed out, and in sad shape thanks to the capture of the federal government by mega-corporations.

Now a small number of politicians, including Sen. Hawley and President Trump, have begun working toward the restoration of America's Main Streets. For the sake of all Americans, let's hope they succeed.

This Month

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Reactions

Who Can Beat Trump?

As best I can tell from watching the DNC debates degenerating as they have into condescending personal attacks and the media headlines already blaming the Russians for the next Trump victory, the Democrats have learned nothing and squandered three-plus years of building goodwill with the working class and rural citizens who they need particularly so long as the Electoral College is the reality of campaigning and elections.

TOM G.
Web comment

Fed-icare For All

This reminds me of one of the major proposals of the People's Party, the original Populists, leading up to the 1892 election: federal sub-treasuries in every state to make low interest loans to farmers. This would have broken their dependence on The Furnishing Man, or The Hiring Man, better known particularly to Americans of African descent simply as "The Man." Prosperity in a post-feudal economy really does depend on cash liquidity to keep everything moving and in the game. Why not give all the people the advantages of this proposal?

SIARLYS JENKINS
Web comment

How Bernie Could Roil the Right

Campaigning in New Hampshire more than four years ago, the Sanders and Trump voters were largely one in the same (at that early point Trump had a very similar message to Bernie); and I do think the unifying message of income inequality, health care, and climate change unites the near entirety of individuals under the age of 40.

TOM SADLOWSKI
Web comment

Defund the Ivies

This is not about "doing good," it's about sustaining networks that keep the elite in control, even as they assuage their guilt about being "privileged." When socialist Bernie rails about free college, do you think he wants to restore an America where somebody without a college degree can make a decent living? Nope—the gatekeepers are going to keep giving to the gate men. The only way to deal with this is a tax on high-end endowments.

J.M. GRONDELSKI
Web comment

In Memory of *TAC* Publisher, Jon Basil Utley (1934-2020)

With deep personal sadness, I regret to share that our beloved publisher, board member and friend, Jon Basil Utley, passed away on March 19th. He was a larger-than-life institution at TAC and in Washington and will be missed dearly.

Utley, who had served as TAC's publisher since 2013, devoted his career to promoting freedom and peace throughout the world. Born in Moscow, Utley saw firsthand the cruelties of that country's communist regime. His father was sent to the gulag and then executed for being one of three leaders of a hunger strike in the camps. His mother, Freda Utley, emigrated to America and became a prominent anticommunist author.

Jon Utley picked up the torch, and, after working in business for 15 years in Latin America, became a foreign correspondent and established himself as a leading voice against both communism, and later, America's military interventions in the Middle East.

In May 2019, Utley received TAC's inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award at our spring gala. His longtime advocacy for freedom, peace, prudence, and a more restrained foreign policy made him a fitting recipient, and we were thrilled to honor him with the inaugural award.

We will greatly miss our champion of constitutional conservatism.

John A. Burtka, IV
Executive Director & Acting Editor

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The American Conservative

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Up With America

In our exclusive interview with Ross Douthat, the conservative *New York Times* columnist describes America as a nation marked by "stalemate, stagnation, and decay" without "a clear sense of both purpose and future possibility." According to this definition of decadence, popularized by historian Jacques Barzun, America is less overindulgent than exhausted. The cultural and political capital accumulated over centuries of Western and American history has been spent down, and she stands naked before the cosmos.

Enter COVID-19, social distancing, shelter-in-place, high unemployment, trillion-dollar deficits, and plummeting markets. Can a decadent society survive a pandemic? More pressingly, can a decadent society with a corrupt ruling class survive a pandemic? The answer to that question hinges on the response of the American people.

In a recent episode of the Americano podcast at *The Spectator*, Fox News host Tucker Carlson lamented that America is "the first experiment in secular materialism over a big population. It works great if your job is to supply people with enough calories. What it doesn't do a very good job of is explaining death."

And so we find ourselves at the end of Lent—a traditional time of penance, fasting, and almsgiving—meditating on death and pondering whether or not Americans have enough moral courage to face not only an existential crisis, but also the material crisis of tending to untold numbers of sick, broke, and dying countrymen.

Will we rise to the challenge? And if so, what role will conservatism play in healing the nation?

When this magazine was founded in 2002, our editors echoed the wisdom of conservative luminaries Edmund Burke and Russell Kirk when they wrote: "We believe conservatism to be the most natural political tendency, rooted in man's taste for the familiar, for family, for faith in God." And it's toward this disposition and the local institutions that support it—our churches, our neighbors, and our homes—that Americans can look for hope when faced with the realities of unemployment or death.

While Congress spent the month of March debating whether to include bailouts for Big Business in the stimulus bill, civil society and small businesses sprang into action to provide for the needs of their communities. Thankfully, Americans don't wait for orders from the federal government before helping their neighbors—in this, we are exceptional.

At the same time, there are some challenges that local institutions simply cannot address in the face of a global pandemic. The cost of maintaining our permanent presence in the Middle East is no longer sustainable, and Congress has a constitutional duty to put the needs of American citizens suffering from coronavirus above our idealistic ambitions to make the world safe for democracy.

While trade and cooperation between sovereign nations provide many benefits, our political independence depends on maintaining a certain degree of economic independence for essential, particularly military and medical, supplies. The pandemic provides an opportunity to map out the genealogies of our supply chains and prudently determine what needs to be made in America.

The necessity of securing our borders and establishing an orderly immigration system that serves our national interests is more urgent than ever before. The safety and happiness of the American people depend on our leaders having a clear sense of who is entering our country and why.

These issues—restraint in American foreign policy, prudential trade relations, and measured immigration policies—were also foundational to the worldview of our magazine's founders and will prove the defining challenges of our generation in the years to come.

As America looks homeward during this time of crisis—just as a family might seek to secure their home, stock up on essential supplies, and tend to the needs of their immediate relatives—we have a duty to serve our fellow citizens and practice charity towards our neighbors. None of this precludes peaceful cooperation with other nations and solidarity with those suffering around the globe. However, our circumstances demand that we prioritize local action over global ambition, and this presents a long overdue opportunity for national renewal.

The choice before us is clear, and the stakes are high. As Yoram Hazony writes in this issue, "We're all going to die soon anyway. The only open question is whether we act honorably, or not, while we're here." History will render a verdict on our actions. But today, while we still have life in our bones, let us rise and say: Down with decadence. Up with America. ■

Front Lines

On Duties to Fathers and Mothers

Coronavirus and the Fifth Commandment

by YORAM HAZONY

From the start of the coronavirus outbreak, media reports have emphasized that most of the deaths occur among the elderly. These reports have badly misrepresented the reality of a savage disease that is in fact flooding intensive care units with adults of all ages: according to the CDC, 48 percent of coronavirus admissions to ICUs in the United States are between the ages of 20-64. True, these younger adults are more likely to survive the disease, but that's only if there's an ICU bed available to treat them, often for a period of more than 15 days. In northern Italy, hospitals have reportedly been refusing treatment to patients over 60 years old—precisely because they are inundated by *younger adults* undergoing respiratory failure.

Eventually, commentators will wake up and stop spreading the dangerous falsehood that COVID-19 is mostly dangerous for the elderly. But in the meantime, the belief that younger individuals aren't really at risk is revealing some unpleasant facts about the way too many of us, and especially "conservatives," think about the older members of society.

In late March, for example, the Republican lieutenant governor of Texas, Dan Patrick, told a national television audience that he and other older citizens would be willing to risk their lives so America could emerge from lockdown and go back to work. "Those of us who are 70 plus, we'll take care of ourselves," Patrick told Tucker Carlson on Fox News. "But don't sacrifice the country. Don't do that. Don't ruin this great American dream…. It's worth whatever it takes to save the country."

I can admire Patrick's willingness to take risks for his country. But his words were misconceived, sending precisely the wrong message about our obligations to our parents and grandparents, and leaving the impression that it would be a mistake to damage the economy if the motive is to protect the elderly.

Similarly, a recent essay by the sociologist Heather MacDonald in *The New Criterion* noted that "approximately 89 percent of Italy's coronavirus deaths had been over the age of seventy," before going on to comment:

> Sad to say, those victims were already nearing the end of their lifespans. They might have soon died from another illness…. Comparing the relative value of lives makes for grisly calculus, but one is forced to ask: … If the measures we undertake to protect a vulnerable few end up exposing them, along with the rest of society, to even more damaging risks—was it worth the cost?

MacDonald, 63, says she would "happily" choose an increased risk to herself over the destruction being brought upon the U.S. and global economy. ("We have already destroyed $5 trillion in stock market wealth over the last few weeks.") Like Patrick, she thinks older people should take more risks to save the country.

To be sure, public policy involves trade-offs, including those that balance economic considerations against human lives. Every time you decide how much to spend on highway improvements, you're making a decision about how many lives will be saved and how many will die. This is no less true in the current crisis, in which decision-makers are being forced to strike a balance between potential hospitalizations and deaths by COVID-19 on the one hand, and the potential consequences (including deaths) of a long economic downturn.

However, there is a third factor to be considered, which has received almost no attention during the present crisis. This is the harm that is done by utilitarian pronouncements about the "relative value" of the lives of people "already nearing the end of their life spans."

In fact, for some of us, the calculation runs in precisely the opposite direction: many of us are willing to make sacrifices to avoid new regions sliding into medical system collapse—with untreated patients dying in hallways while sick, desperate doctors working around the clock doing triage to save those they think are fittest (e.g., those under 60). And we'll still be willing to make these sacrifices even if the utilitarians succeed in showing that letting old patients die untreated in hallways is financially beneficial for the rest of us.

This is not because we are panicking or irrational. It's because we've spent 3,000 years exposed to a Jewish and Christian teaching that we are supposed to honor our parents and the aged (Exodus 20:11; Leviticus 19:32; Deuteronomy 5:15, 27:16; Proverbs 23:22). And there's no way to honor your parents and the aged while you're calculating that, really, we can live with the collapse of the hospitals and ICUs

because, after all, the younger people will get off with only minor flu symptoms.

The reason that so many are so brain-dead on this subject is that in a liberal society, the idea of owing honor to our parents and grandparents is taught almost nowhere. Many people don't seem to even know what would be involved.

The basic issue is this: the commandment to honor your parents and the aged isn't primarily about doing easy things like buying presents or giving compliments to older people when they're healthy and eager to show they appreciate what you're doing for them. Rather, the commandment to honor parents and older people is mostly aimed at getting us to do things *that are really hard to do, and that we really don't want to do*. Like taking care of sick, miserable older people who don't necessarily appreciate what you're doing for them—and doing it even when you yourself can't remember why you're doing it.

Look at it this way: if it were an easy thing to honor your father and your mother as they get old, it wouldn't have made it into the Ten Commandments. There were lots of other moral principles jockeying for that slot. But they didn't make it in because this one is very hard to do.

It's at least a question whether our current habit of dumping our aging parents into old-age homes where someone else takes care of them even puts us in the ballpark of honoring our parents and the aged. But even if it does, this doesn't mean we're allowed to take the next step and say: "What's another two or three years of life to him anyway?"

Or: "What does it really matter if she's got a ventilator? She's a goner soon either way."

Once you're thinking this way, you've really been reduced to some kind of vicious animal. It's not just your selfishness that's the problem—that is, your deciding that you don't want to sacrifice your time and wealth for someone else.

It's a lot worse than that: the problem is that you've shown yourself incapable of the simplest responsibilities to those who gave you life, protected you and sacrificed for you, and taught you everything you know. Everything you've got is because of them, but you can't be troubled to protect them in their last days.

Many "conservative" politicians, academics, and journalists have built careers on the party trick of showing how every problem really reduces to economics: to GNP growth and how the market is doing. But not every problem reduces to economics. Some problems reduce to questions of loyalty, and to what you are willing to give up in order to be loyal—and I mean truly loyal—to people who were loyal to you a long time ago.

For this reason, we cannot take that final step of letting "Those of us who are 70-plus…take care of ourselves," as Dan Patrick proposes that we do. That's just not something our parents and grandparents have a right to ask of us. Because when we agree to let our parents and our aged die like beasts—it is we ourselves who are reduced to the level of animals.

Being a decent person means that there are lines you don't cross. And one of those lines is crossed when the current, young, strong generation feels it has been freed from its obligations to the older, weaker, dying generation that brought them into the world.

That's exactly what is implied in all these grotesque comments about how the coronavirus is killing people who probably would have died soon anyway. When you say they would have died soon anyway, what you're really telling us is that we've been freed from our obligations to them.

But you forget that we're *all* going to die soon anyway. The only open question is whether we act honorably, or not, while we're here. ■

Yoram Hazony is chairman of the Edmund Burke Foundation and author of The Virtue of Nationalism. *He is currently in lockdown in Jerusalem with his family. Follow him on Twitter at @yhazony.*

Chinese Chokehold

How Xi's cartels hold American medicine hostage

by ROSEMARY GIBSON

If the coronavirus pandemic has taught us anything, it's that the United States is unprepared for a disease outbreak or biowarfare because we no longer make the medicines necessary for survival.

Shortages of masks, ventilators, and respirators have made headline news, but shortages of critical medicines have remained largely out of public view.

On February 27, 2020, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) reported the shortage of a drug caused by the coronavirus outbreak in China. The agency didn't name the drug because it would cause hoarding. Since then, the FDA has gone silent about shortages. Meanwhile, U.S. drug wholesalers are "allocating" critical generic drugs, an industry euphemism for rationing.

How dependent are we on China for medicines to care for people with severe cases of coronavirus? China is the source of 90 percent of the chemical starting materials needed to manufacture common generic drugs that help people recover. They include medicines to increase dangerously low blood pressure such as norepinephrine, the antibiotic azithromycin for bacterial infections, and propofol given when patients are placed on a ventilator to help them breathe.

How Did We Become Dependent on China?

Generic drugs are 90 percent of the medicines Americans take. Thousands of them are made with chemical starting materials from China.

China's dominance escalated after the U.S. granted most-favored-nation trading status to China. Within three years of the U.S.-China Trade Relations Act in 2000 and China joining the World Trade Organization (WTO), the last aspirin manufacturing plant in the U.S. shut its doors, the last facility making vitamin C went out of business, and the only remaining penicillin plant announced its closure. Now, the U.S. has virtually no capacity to manufacture antibiotics.

A common view is that production has shifted to China because of lower labor costs and weaker regulations. There's more to the story.

Western companies cannot compete successfully because the free market doesn't exist in generic drug and chemical ingredient manufacturing. China's cartels fueled by government subsidies undercut U.S. and other companies, driving them out of business. Western firms aren't competing against Chinese companies. They are competing against the Chinese government.

U.S. Generic Drug Manufacturing is Collapsing

China is moving up the value chain and makes 10 percent of the generic drugs in the U.S. The first was an HIV/AIDS medicine. Other generics made in China by domestic companies and sold in the United States include: antibiotics, antidepressants, birth control pills, chemotherapy for cancer treatment for children and adults, and medicines for Alzheimer's, diabetes, Parkinson's, and epilepsy, to name a few.

As China ramps up production of generic drugs for American hospitals, pharmacies, and home medicine cabinets, U.S. and other Western manufacturing is collapsing. Mylan, a U.S.-based generic company, announced last year that it was merging with Pfizer. Around the same time, Pfizer announced the opening of its global generic headquarters in China. Sandoz, a European company, and Teva, an Israeli company, announced in early 2019 that they will discontinue production of many medicines.

Long before the coronavirus hit the U.S. homeland in earnest, hundreds of medicines were in short supply or unavailable altogether. At a Senate Small Business Committee hearing chaired by Senator Marco Rubio in March 2020, a Johns Hopkins professor said that its hospital has 200 to 300 drugs in shortage, far more than the 98 officially reported by the FDA.

Anton Petrus / Getty Images

Now, in the middle of a global pandemic we face a perfect storm. Production in China has been shut down. China has withheld exports of masks and other protective gear, and it is likely that China has been withholding domestically produced medicines.

I visited a hospital recently and talked with doctors about the availability of critical drugs. They said they could not obtain a critical antibiotic to treat pneumonia. Many other antibiotics are being rationed.

More than 100 countries affected by the coronavirus are competing for a limited global supply of critical medicines whose production depends decidedly on a single country.

Hungary, the UK, India, and other countries have sealed their borders to prohibit exports of essential medicines. Although India has a very large generic drug industry, it depends on China for 70 percent of the chemical starting materials to make drugs.

If You Control Medicines You Control the World

China relishes its geopolitical leverage. As the number of coronavirus cases climbed in the U.S. last month, China's official news outlet issued this threat: "If China announces that its drugs are for domestic use and bans exports, the United States will fall into the hell of a new coronavirus epidemic."

China's threats to withhold medicines are not new. More than a decade ago the Chinese government threatened drug shortages if the federal government failed to act as it wished. No trade kerfuffle existed at that time.

Make no mistake, China knows precisely where the U.S. is vulnerable. Meanwhile, the FDA and industry are scrambling to pinpoint those medicines for which we are solely or mostly dependent on China.

In July 2019, the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission held a hearing on U.S. dependence on China for medicines. During the hearing, a representative from the Department of Defense testified about the risks to the military of medicines made with key ingredients from China.

This testimony triggered a spellbinding account by a commissioner, a retired Army colonel with a distinguished record of military service. He talked about his three different blood pressure medicines whose key ingredients were made in China and contained rocket fuel. If he was getting contaminated drugs, active duty military people were probably getting them too, he opined.

The retired Army colonel was one of millions of Americans whose blood pressure medicines were contaminated with carcinogens. In July 2018, the FDA announced the first of many recalls. While many manufacturers recalled their products, the most troubling was the manufacturer in China whose active ingredient contained more than 200 times the acceptable limit of the rocket fuel carcinogen, per pill. Even worse, the company knew its product did not meet U.S. standards but sold it anyway.

National Security at Risk

The coronavirus landed on the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS *Theodore Roosevelt* last month as it was patrolling the South China Sea. More than two dozen crew members have been infected. The carrier was forced to make an emergency stop in Guam so all 5,000 people on board could be tested.

Make no mistake, the United States faces an existential threat posed by China's control over the global supply of the ingredients and chemical materials to manufacture critical drugs. In the hands of an adversary, medicines can be weaponized. They can be made with lethal contaminants or sold without any real medicine in them, rendering them ineffective.

Same Talking Points: Generic Drug Industry and Premier Xi Jinping

The director of the White House Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy, Peter Navarro, drafted an executive order with Buy American medicine provisions for the U.S. military, the VA, and the strategic national stockpile.

An avalanche of opposition from special interests has erupted. They claim that making medicines in the United States would somehow disrupt the medicine supply chain. As noted, it was already in shambles before coronavirus, plagued with poor quality medicines in persistent shortage.

The generic drug industry circulated a draft letter to the White House on March 24, 2020, which stated that medicines made in America would "destabilize the (medicine) supply chain." Two days later, Chinese Premier Xi Jinping used a similar talking point during a virtual G20 meeting. He said global supply chains need to "remain stable."

Premier Xi added that China will increase its supply of active pharmaceutical ingredients to the international market. The generic industry is not opposed to China's growing nationalism and monopoly position, yet it fiercely opposes the United States salvaging a bare minimum of manufacturing capability for our national security.

The fate of the executive order is uncertain. Washington lobbyists are working overtime to increase our dependence on a country that has threatened to kill us. Let that sink in. ■

Rosemary Gibson is senior advisor at the Hastings Center and author of China Rx: Exposing the Risks of America's Dependence on China for Medicine. *Follow her on Twitter at @Rosemary100.*

Norman Rockwell: American Realist

In a new time of crisis, his 'Four Freedoms' provide lessons for today.

by WILLIAM MURCHISON

I began this little discourse in those easily less raucous moments before the coronavirus volcano blew its top. We imagined back in those days that our No. 1 worry was how many of our fellow Americans honestly, no kidding, wished Comrade Sanders would turn our country inside out and upside down. Hah! We soon enough found the world caught up in truly bigtime anxieties; like, will Costco still have toilet paper on the shelf when I get there?

With some relief, I returned to the subject I previously had in mind: contemplation of Norman Rockwell.

"*Norman Rockwell?!*" you say. And what have apple-cheeked Boy Scouts and grandmas with gingham aprons, and memories smelling of tightly closed attics got to do with the value of U.S. Treasuries and the quarantine restrictions—and so on? Not much, maybe. And perchance that's not the right question.

What *would* the right question be? I suggest it would be: how, in these times of strain and strife and formerly unthinkable anxiety, do any of us get along without occasional summonses to look on the usual, the everyday, the ordinary, the lovable? How do we get along without normality—whatever normality may have come to look like in the age of COVID-19?

A not-quite-elapsed traveling exhibition of Rockwell paintings drew my attention to this not-insignificant matter. The exhibition, organized by the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, came recently to Houston after stops at sites such as the New-York Historical Society and the Henry Ford Museum, with a wind-up visit planned at the Denver Art Museum. It is sad to think of a cruel and crazy public health disruption affecting the exhibition's gentle progress. Regardless, a lot of Americans have managed to admire the exhibition and its central idea that freedom, for Americans, is normal, an ideal to be cherished, a goal to be strived after.

Norman Rockwell certainly thought so when, in the middle of the Second World War, he executed the "Four Freedoms" paintings. We all recognize them from photos at the very least. When it comes to popular appreciation, they must be right up there with George Washington's Christmas Eve voyage across the Delaware River, as rendered by Emanuel Leutze. In all four paintings the passage of sentiment—honest feeling—from eye to heart is quick and unbroken.

Here's Grandma, proudly, lovingly, bestowing the Thanksgiving turkey upon family and any guests fortunate enough to have wheedled an invitation. "Freedom from Want," this particular work is called. Here's a frugally dressed New Englander unsuspected of academic attainments, having his say before an assemblage of friends and neighbors—"Freedom of Speech." It is pertinent to add, in 2020, that no audience member is trying to shout the fellow down or embarrass him. There are no cameras, no bloggers jotting down notes. Pretty old-fashioned and third-rate stuff by modern standards—lovably so.

The other two paintings, their homely affirmations derived from President Franklin Roosevelt's third State of the Union address in January 1941, are "Freedom of Worship" and "Freedom from Fear." The alliterative quartet sum up, by Roosevelt's purposeful reckoning, the postwar ideals FDR wished Americans to think upon as their own participation in the world conflict drew nearer.

Norman Rockwell was then in his prime as an artist for the *Saturday Evening Post*. The four paintings, which required seven months of thoughtful, concentrated work, appeared sequentially on *Post* covers beginning February 20, 1943. The project succeeded beyond reasonable expectations. The *Post* received 60,000 letters of virtually unanimous praise. *Letters*, there being no email then!

The Rockwell Museum, chief repository of the artist's vast oeuvre, judged the present moment propitious for putting these works on the road, along with other Rockwells of note, such as his painterly hymn to a small black girl being escorted by federal marshals to a no-longer-segregated Louisiana school. The exhibition celebrates what we might call the inward essence of the United States of America.

That essence, viewers of the Four Freedoms can scarcely fail to notice, partakes more of pride and pleasure than of agony and reproach; more of fingers spread over proud, thumping hearts than clutched in fury at fellow Americans.

Granted, a foreign war was going on at the time Rockwell lined up his human models for the Four Freedoms canvases. Historical circumstances, it seems to me, cannot account solely for today's eagerness to impose political or social orthodoxies: no vote needed, no discussion desired. We have become, I fear, a less generous people than the great multitude of Americans Rockwell saw with his artist's eye, joined in a common cause irrespective of race or sex.

Nor—a consequential point, I think—have we much sense of humor. We don't share, generally speaking, the common understanding of what comedy throughout all ages has cultivated: the understanding of our own frailness and occasional absurdity. We don't laugh much, save when we, or our "comedians" (don't get me started on late-night TV!), presume to make fun of those supposedly less enlightened, less compassionate than ourselves. Norman Rockwell's personal and artistic sense of humor, I am wont to claim, was dispositive in his success—and, I might add, in his civilizing function as an artist.

The social, political, cultural—Lord, the *everything*—irrelevance of Norman Rockwell has long been an article of faith among Americans of advanced views. "Really, that man!"—doggies and barn dances, lace curtains and bashful swains; subjects of interest only to clingers to guns or religion in their losing contest with The Present; "deplorable" people, some

of them, nursing underdeveloped social consciences. Shudder!

The artist's surname is frequently made over as a kind of sneer. "Ah, what a charming Rockwellian little scene," with its hints of Coolidge and Tarkington, ice cream socials and kindly cops.

Rockwell's own biographer, Deborah Solomon, described his work as "steeped in the we-the-people communitarian ideals of America's founding in the eighteenth century." Hence not really up-to-date, you know. Though born in New York City, he lived and painted in small communities—Arlington, Vermont, and Stockbridge, Massachusetts—using his neighbors as models. He was in the artistic sense as much the originalist as Nino Scalia hovering over the Supreme Court bench.

In a recent *City Journal* column, the essayist Lance Morrow wrote of an America full of "new ways" battling for supremacy with "an older America, a country that is, like Atlantis, sunk in the depths of time": not least the present time, with seeds recklessly sown in the artist's own age by flappers and reformers of one kind and another.

One shouldn't (I think) understand Norman Rockwell as beckoning viewers of his art seductively into the dead life of a dead world. There were things he wanted those viewers nonetheless to look at—things that superseded places and times and temporary circumstances: kindliness, friendship, cooperation, courage, renunciation, gentle irony. He was an optimist; like most optimists he flunked Despair 101 and was instructed not to return to class without a written excuse.

Life in the Rockwell era was just too funny, too warm, too enjoyable for the then-minority notion that All—All—Was Lost! It certainly wasn't lost if one remembered to say thank-you after a party or run an errand for an older neighbor, or maybe asked the 14th-least-attractive girl in the class for a dance at the prom. There was hope in the exertions of normal people in those days. We might just, one way or another, get through the challenging times that had descended out of nowhere.

The Four Freedoms summed up, in their war-propagandistic way, the commitments that underlay the life Rockwell was always holding up for admiration. Americans could worship and pray as they liked. They could speak as they liked. To the fruits of their labor they enjoyed lasting entitlement. The wartime fear that gripped other peoples was absent from homes where parents, by Rockwell's depiction, stood protectively over sleeping children.

Library of Congress / Corbis / VCG via Getty Images

I hazard a guess: the grandmother (a flesh-and-blood person after all) shown by the artist delivering a turkey—Freedom from Want—has great-great-great grandchildren alive and extant in a world not so far removed from the world then at war: tested by fear, riven by rivalries.

She has passed on to those children—I am guessing out loud—the gifts with which Norman Rockwell artistically endowed her: love, generosity, warmth. I guess admiringly that amid panics and pandemics those same children represent those very virtues, their confidence strengthening all around them as they face in their own time what there is no choice but to face—as proud, Rockwellian Americans. ■

William Murchison is a nationally syndicated columnist and author, most recently, of The Cost of Liberty: The Life of John Dickinson.

The End of Big

The coronavirus, amid all the destruction, is a return to reality.

by WILLIAM S. LIND

The coronavirus has done us some favors.

Yes, I know it has created serious problems for a great number of people. If I could throw a lever on the steam engine of life to shut the virus down, I would do so at once. But the vast, black cloud does have some silver linings.

First and most important for our survival, it has forced this, and many other countries, to exercise long-forgotten practices developed over centuries to confront epidemics. The coronavirus itself is not frightfully dangerous. As of this writing, the infection rate in Italy, today's global hotspot, is 25 out of every 100,000 people. In South Korea, where the epidemic has peaked and is now receding, the rate to date is 16 per 100,000. The death rate, originally thought to be 2-3 percent, which is high, now looks like 1 percent or less, because of underreporting of mild cases.

But the world will face far more dangerous diseases, thanks to the Hell-spawned technology of genetic engineering. Both as a result of accidents and because they will be created as weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), genetically engineered plagues are on the way, plagues that will give the Black Death a run for its money. I have been warning for decades that the future WMD is the genetically engineered disease. Unlike nuclear weapons, making them does not require vast, expensive facilities; they are knowledge-based. States will be leery, because of the risk of blowback. Non-state entities that wage Fourth Generation war may worry less about that. If you're ISIS, so what if 100,000,000 Muslims die? They were all martyrs.

When we get hit by such weapons—when, not if—we will need to do what we are doing now: quarantines, shutting down places where people gather, social distancing, etc. These are age-old practices. The coronavirus has forced us to revive them, and we will learn much from the exercise.

Another silver lining is a sharp lesson on the dangers of depending on global movement of people and things. It will take a while to die, but I think globalism has received a mortal thrust. Suddenly, relying on countries on other continents for things we need, not just things we want, looks much less attractive. And when really dangerous plagues break out elsewhere—30, 50, 75 percent mortality—we will have to close our borders instantly. President Trump bought us time by shutting down travel, first from China, then from Europe. But the coronavirus still arrived here. With what genetic engineering will create, one case will be too many. We will have to make, grow, and mine what we need right here at home. Won't that be awful?

President Trump also gave the future a useful lesson by relying on the private sector as much as possible, clearing regulatory obstacles and liability risks so companies could do what they do best, namely change direction quickly. As I write, here in Cleveland a distillery has stopped making booze and is producing hand sanitizer instead (very tasty hand sanitizer). Many businesses can turn like a day sailer compared to the state's 100-gun ship-of-the-line. The companies that can't are usually big companies.

That points to what may be the brightest silver in the coronavirus cloud. What we are now going through may be the end of big.

First nationally, and then globally, the economic dictate of markets and socialists alike became, "Get big or get out." The Ag Department preached that endlessly to farmers and it still does. We've seen big in the form of big-box stores that devastate our towns and local businesses. Our manufacturing, including the well-paying jobs that sustained a vast blue-collar middle class, first got big here, and then got bigger by moving those jobs overseas. Big finance became a third of our economy, all of it built on thin air (I recall an ad from the 1890s by a Wisconsin bank: "90% of our mortgages are local"). America gave birth to the biggest of the big: to Amazon, to Google, to the Internet itself.

The coronavirus tells us that the future wants small. Not only do far deadlier pandemics mean the end of globalism, they will also sometimes require countries to function as collections of smaller entities: entities that can feed, cure, heat, and provide work for themselves, at least for a time. When new Black Deaths created in labs do reach our shores (thank God for those oceans!), we will need to shut down much or all internal movement of people and goods (things can also be carriers). The farmer's market may be the only market. Local, small farmers with diversified crops may have to feed us. That local coal mine, or one on the other side of your home state, may prove a lifesaver. When everything big fails, life becomes local whether we want it to or not. We must of course try to prevent that from happening. But the coronavirus warns us to start thinking about it.

At root, the coronavirus has brought something conservatives have long wanted, real conservatives anyway: the return of reality. Since the 1960s, everything big has embraced Herbert Marcuse's call to replace the reality principle with the pleasure principle. Big government has done it, big finance, big business, big ag, and especially big entertainment. The end of big will be messy. But small has much to offer on the other side. ■

William S. Lind is the author, with Lt. Col. Gregory A. Thiele, of the 4th Generation Warfare Handbook. *Mr. Lind's most recent book is* Retroculture: Taking America Back.


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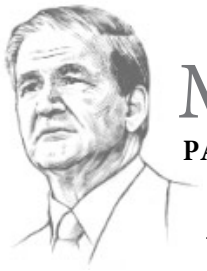

Made in America

PATRICK J. BUCHANAN

2020: Trump vs. Coronavirus

This is the question that is going to dominate the election: How did you perform in the great crisis?"

So says GOP Congressman Tom Cole of Oklahoma in a recent *New York Times*.

GOP National Committeeman Henry Barbour of Mississippi calls the crisis "a defining moment…. The more [Trump] reassures Americans, gives them the facts and delivers results, the harder it will be for Joe Biden."

Indeed, it is not a stretch to say Trump's presidency will stand or fall on the resolution of the coronavirus crisis and how Trump is perceived as having led us in that battle. Recent polls appear to confirm that.

Though daily baited by a hostile media for being late to recognize the severity of the crisis, in one Gallup poll a week ago, Trump was at 49 percent approval, the apogee of his presidency, with 60 percent of the nation awarding him high marks for his handling of the pandemic.

What was the public's assessment of how Trump's antagonists in the media have performed in America's great medical crisis?

Of 10 institutions, with hospitals first, at 88 percent approval, the media came in dead last, the only institution whose disapproval, at 55 percent, exceeded the number of Americans with a favorable opinion of their performance.

The media are paying a price in lost reputation with the nation they claim to represent by reassuming the role of "adversary press" in a social crisis where, whatever one's view of Donald Trump, the country wants the president to succeed.

If Biden begins to mimic a hostile media, baiting Trump at every turn, pointing out conflicts in his views, Joe will invite the same fate the media seem to have brought upon themselves.

Since that Gallup poll, Trump has been seen daily by millions in the role of commander in chief. He speaks from the podium in the White House briefing room or the Rose Garden just outside the Oval Office. He is invariably flanked by respected leaders in medicine, science, business and economics. All appear as Trump allies, and Trump treats them as his field commanders in the war on the virus.

And Joe Biden? He pops up infrequently in interviews out of the basement of his Delaware home where, sheltering in place, he reads short scripted speeches from a teleprompter.

And Biden's presence has been wholly eclipsed by daily televised appearances of Governor Andrew Cuomo, who is at the epicenter of the crisis in New York. Cuomo is taking on the aspect of both rival and partner to Trump.

What Trump is doing calls to mind Richard Nixon's "Rose Garden strategy" in 1972. Though goaded by the press, Nixon avoided attacking his opponent, George McGovern, and declined to engage him on issues. Instead, Nixon used the Rose Garden to highlight popular initiatives.

Candidate Nixon's campaign strategy in 1972 was not to campaign.

But if Biden cannot gather crowds to hear him in a time of social distancing, how does he get his message out? How does he attack Trump without appearing to undermine the president in his role as a wartime commander in chief, where America wants Trump to succeed?

How does a basement-bound Biden compete with Trump in the Oval Office, Cabinet Room, East Room, and Rose Garden?

Whom does Biden call upon to rival Trump's instant access to respected leaders eager to come and stand beside the president in the most serious crisis since World War II?

How does Biden recapture the spotlight of Super Tuesday?

Senator Bernie Sanders wants Biden to come out and debate. But that seems a no-win proposition.

Moreover, when Biden appears on camera, he often seems confused and forgetful, loses his train of thought and doesn't remember what he came to say. The sense that Biden is losing it is taking hold, and not only on the Republican right.

Democrats have to be looking closely at Cuomo's success, as they wonder how Biden will stand up in the debates with Trump six months from now.

And what lies ahead for Democrats when spring turns into summer?

The Tokyo Olympics, scheduled to begin July 24, have been postponed until 2021. The Democratic National Convention, scheduled for Milwaukee even earlier in July, has yet to be postponed.

But if Tokyo recognizes it would be a terrible risk to the health of athletes and spectators to have people come from all over the world to Japan this summer, would it not also be an intolerable risk to have Americans from all 50 states and U.S. territories arrive for a week of mingling in midsummer in Milwaukee?

For Biden to win this election, Trump must lose it.

And the one way Trump can lose it is the perception on the part of a majority of Americans that he has proven an ineffectual president in America's worst pandemic since the Spanish flu of 1918.

If Trump is seen as the victor over the virus, Biden is toast. ■

Down With Decadence

How to fight American decadence in an age of pandemic

by **ROD DREHER AND ROSS DOUTHAT**

I interviewed Ross Douthat about his new book, *The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success*, in late February, when COVID-19 had not yet become a full-fledged crisis in the United States. A month on, with the nation plunged into a public health and economic catastrophe without a clear end in sight, accelerationist pressures are putting Douthat's theory of sustainable decadence to the test. The coronavirus crisis has been aptly described as a "tsunami" event, in which all our systems are overwhelmed at once. Once the tidal wave recedes, we may discover that the agonizing event purged the rot from the system, clearing the way for the renewal which Douthat hopes for in the comments below. Or, more darkly, if the decadence had reached the very roots of our civilization, we may be at the triggering event for a new Dark Age. Either way, the things Ross Douthat discusses below are urgently important in a way they were not mere weeks ago — Rod Dreher

Rod Dreher: When most of us hear the word "decadence," we think of Sodom and Gomorrah, or the late Roman Empire, or Weimar Germany. But that's not what you're talking about. Would you clarify what you mean by decadence?

Ross Douthat: I'm following a definition proposed 20 years ago by the late cultural historian Jacques Barzun, who argued that we should understand "decadence" as referring to periods when wealthy and dynamic societies enter into stalemate, stagnation, and decay—when they lose a clear sense of both purpose and future possibility. Which doesn't exclude scenarios like rapid moral decline or fascist or communist takeover: a decadent society is vulnerable to both. But under decadence you're often more likely to get a kind of moral or cultural mediocrity than either radical villainy or sainthood. And our own decadence seems to fit that pattern: in certain ways we look more stable and less flagrantly debased than in the 1970s, when crime rates and abortion rates and divorce rates and drug abuse were much higher, and our vices have a more private, virtual, numbing style.

Likewise, a decadent society can collapse under the right circumstances, and our sclerotic institutions are certainly vulnerable to certain stresses—like the coronavirus! But decadence can also last a long time: Weimar fell to Hitler quickly, but the "late" Roman empire (or the Ottoman or Chinese empires later) lasted for centuries in a condition of decay. So I don't think you can assume that our decadence is going to turn to crisis and collapse immediately; it might be a lot more sustainable than people think.

Rod Dreher: You and I are both religious conservatives, but I think it fair to say that I'm a lot more culturally pessimistic than you are. What are the greatest differences between your concerns about decadence and my own?

Ross Douthat: Well, as a faithful reader of your work, I would say that you see a Weimar replay as more likely, probably with an aggressive cultural Left playing the totalitarian role, and I see the forces that might bring liberalism crashing down—an authoritarian socialism on the Left, an authoritarian populism on the Right—as themselves too constrained and

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Ross Douthat is an Opinion columnist for The New York Times.

weakened by decadence to swiftly impose the kind of regime that their critics fear. I think as Donald Trump has been constrained and often impotent as president, so too would be President Bernie Sanders; I think that the activist Left seems somewhat more powerful on the internet than in the real world; I think a scenario where our shared Christian faith is pressured and cajoled is more likely than one where it ends up persecuted. And I think our wealth cushions us, at least somewhat, against shocks that in a different era might usher in a version of the 1930s.

More generally, I think that you see the current moment in terms of an onrushing wave—liquid modernity, carrying all before it—while I see a more cyclical pattern at work, and a lot more stasis over the last couple of generations especially. I think we lived through a real cultural revolution in the 1960s, and today's disturbances are aftershocks—important, obviously, but less trajectory-altering than it sometimes seems.

Which doesn't mean that we won't arrive, eventually, at a soft despotism or a genuine Aldous Huxleyan dystopia. But I think any such process is happening more slowly, with a lot of ebbs and flows and many persistent stalemates and unresolved conflicts, than it sometimes feels just from reading the daily incident report on Twitter.

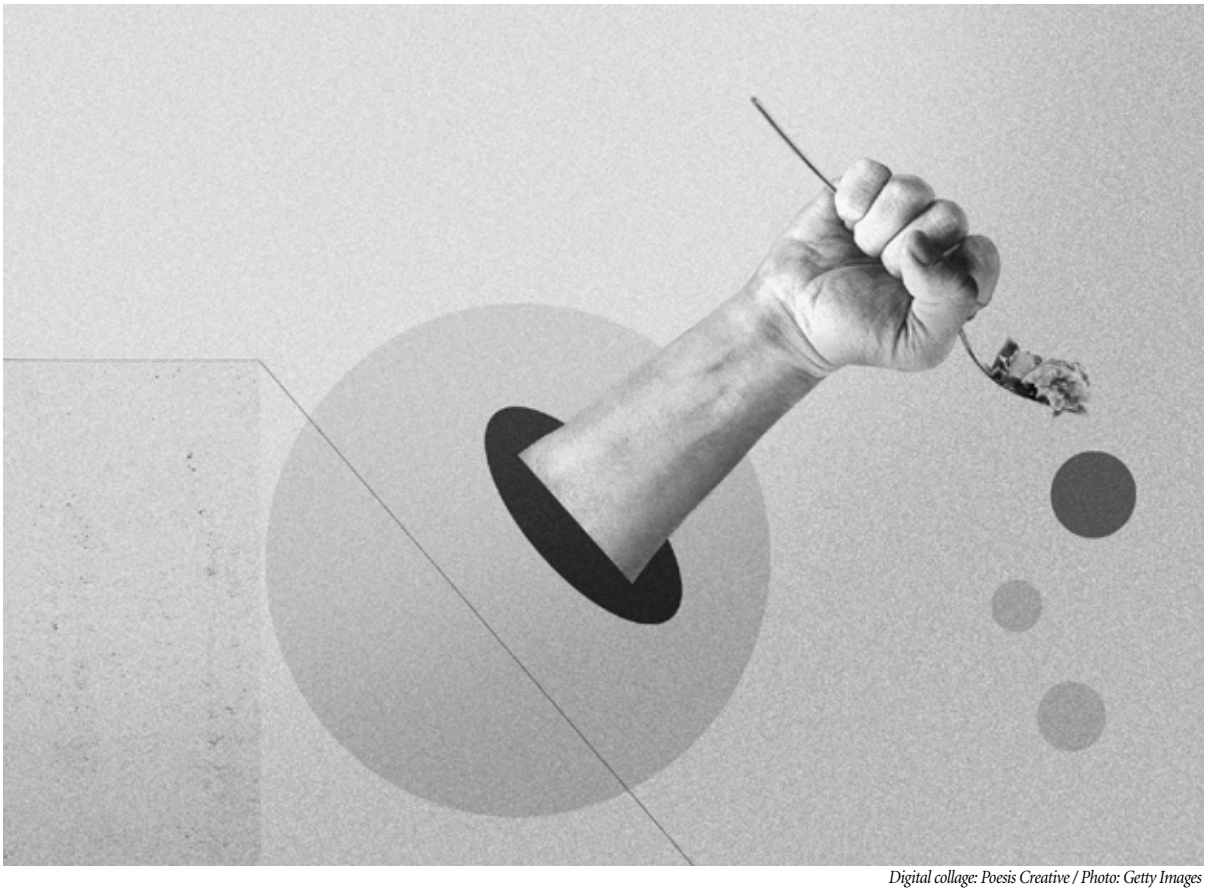
Rod Dreher: Let me press you on this a bit. You write about decadence as "economic stagnation, institutional decay, and cultural and intellectual exhaustion at a high level of material prosperity and technological development." I accept the truth of this diagnosis, but it's hard to muster a sense of urgency about it. I mean, I look at the collapse of the stable family, the demise of Christianity as the settled moral and metaphysical narrative of our civilization, and now the loss of the gender binary, for God's sake, as indications of a more visceral decline—the kind of decadence that strikes me as much more directly affecting the life of my kids than the failure of Hollywood's creativity, or the disappointment of the institutional church.

Ross Douthat: I'm not arguing that we shouldn't feel the decline of Christianity or the collapse of the stable family viscerally; as a Catholic columnist for a secular newspaper and someone with divorced parents and divorced grandparents, I feel them as viscerally as anyone. But the worst collapse of the family happened between 1960 and 1990, with the divorce revolution and Roe v. Wade, and since then there's been a certain stabilization: low divorce rates, less teen pregnancy, lower abortion rates, and even the rise of out-of-wedlock birth rates has lately leveled off. Which has left us with a different set of problems: the retreat from marriage and romance and sexual complementarianism rather than too many affairs and abortions or too much teenage promiscuity, the growth of P.D. Jamesian sterility rather than sexual chaos, the numbing effects of porn-induced impotence rather Hefnerian excess. These are problems of decadence, rather than indicators of looming social collapse.

And likewise with our shared faith's decline: that's a story that's been going on for centuries, and in the United States accelerated dramatically in the 1960s—but what we've seen in the last 20 years is more of an after-effect, in which loosely affiliated people stop identifying with their parents' churches, than it is sudden and dramatic secularization. The rise of the "Nones" may be leveling off, there's a pretty resilient core of church attendance, and the theological tendency that you and I both like to lament—Moralistic Therapeutic Deism—won its greatest victories in the 1970s, not the 2010s. Whether it's New Age spirituality or self-help religion or even astrology, I don't think we're necessarily hurtling into post-Christianity so much as making an eternal return to 1975. Which isn't a great year to return to, but we should see the cycling at work.

Rod Dreher: To what extent do you think the myth of Progress, which is something we Americans of all political tribes absorb with our mother's milk, blinds us to decadence?

Ross Douthat: In two ways. First, the assumption that technological progress is an inevitable feature of modernity makes it hard for people to recognize when it actually slows down—which it has, I think, outside of technologies of communication and simulation, since the 1960s. The assumption that the robots must be coming for our jobs, for instance, shows up in contemporary politics all the time, even though there's little data to back it up: the big automation shocks are



Digital collage: Poesis Creative / Photo: Getty Images

in the past, and productivity growth—the best measure of technology's effect on work—has slowed down since the late 1990s, rather than speeding up, and projects like the self-driving car keep running up against pretty major limitations, like driving in the rain. Our computers and phones are genuinely amazing, but a lot of the innovations we expected in the '60s or even the '90s really haven't yet showed up.

Then second, we tend to assume that the innovations we do have are worth more than less tangible but possibly more important goods—the forms of community and solidarity that you write about so often. Or, alternatively, we assume that even if there are costs to living our lives mediated by screens and phones, or inside McMansions or SUVs, the fact that people are choosing these things—as "free" consumers—means that we can't resist or choose another way. I think it's very clear that some basic forms of human flourishing require establishing more control over the role the internet plays in our lives—reducing our exposure to social media, keeping kids offline as long as possible, and censoring or restricting online porn. But it's very hard for modern Americans to wrap their minds around the possibility that new technology can be managed or resisted; "you can't fight technological change" is a very powerful social and cultural idea.

Rod Dreher: Walker Percy had this theory that people secretly loved hurricanes, because the prospect of impending disaster re-enchanted the world, in part by casting out the spirit of ennui. What would you say to people today who long for some sort of cleansing cataclysm to purge the rot from the system?

Ross Douthat: Be careful what you wish for! There are a lot of ways to exit decadence, and for every pathway to a renaissance there are several that just lead down to disaster. Percy is right, I think, that there are human gifts and graces that only emerge under stress, and that a sense of our own mortality is essential to being human and more palpably felt in the shadow of a natural disaster, or 9/11, or now the coronavirus. But it's still wrong to wish for the disaster and foolish to make choices that might hasten it.

I think a lot about the way that September 11, which happened when I was in college, made a whole cohort of young people and intellectuals feel like this was the end of decadence that we'd been waiting for, that at last there would be some grand purpose to life, some civilizational struggle for our times. And what came of that? Not an American renewal, not a successful crusade for democracy and human rights: just a lot of dead people in the Middle East and a war that's devolved into the droning of terrorists and the perpetual management of frozen conflicts. That's an example of what in the book I call the perils of anti-decadence: we can and should be discontented with our situation, but we should recognize all the ways the revolutionary or crusading alternatives can end like the Iraq war, or for that matter World War I—in death and futility and grief.

Rod Dreher: I've been working for the past year on a book about lessons we should learn from Christians who endured Soviet totalitarianism. One thing I've gotten from my historical reading is how much our own decadent moment resembles the decadence of late Imperial Russia and Weimar Germany. With these relatively recent historical examples in mind, do you worry about where the inability of our political system to reform itself might take the country?

Ross Douthat: Absolutely, and that fear has been sharpened by watching the way that the coronavirus seems poised to hit us in all our stress points, from far-flung supply chains to incompetent bureaucracies to our polarized and gridlocked politics to the not-exactly-trustworthy presidency of Donald Trump.

But there are three differences between our situation and your past examples that I'd stress. First, we're a much, much richer society than Tsarist Russia or even Weimar Germany, which both makes it easier to weather economic crises (the Great Depression gave us 30 percent unemployment but our various stabilizers meant the Great Recession wasn't nearly that bad) and gives people a sense that they have more to lose from revolution than did people in the not-so-distant European past.

Second, we're a much older society than the 20th century European (or, for that matter Asian) societies in which crises overturned everything and then totalitarianism took root. Age makes people more cautious and risk-averse; it also makes them much less inclined to take to the streets in mass protest or mass violence. I point out in the book, for instance, that the most enthusiastic participants in our virtual civil war, the Resistance types and the MAGA rallygoers, are often middle-aged suburban and retirees—not exactly the groups you'd expect to start brawling with one another in the streets. Meanwhile campuses and cities, the places where our 1960s tumults happened, are surprisingly calm and quiet in the Trump era.

Finally, we have the internet as a kind of safe playspace for revolutionaries—a zone where you can rebel against decadence by cosplaying 1917 or 1968, so that the impulses that lead to revolution in prior eras might end up channeled into virtual extremism instead. Occasionally online radicalism does leak into the real world, in terrible ways—as incel or white supremacist violence, or the Bernie Sanders supporter who tried to murder Republican politicians. But those figures seem to me more like outliers than forerunners; so long as the internet keeps getting more immersive, I think we're more likely to respond to institutional and cultural decay by play-acting the Russian Revolution rather than actually enacting it.

Rod Dreher: For me, the most important sign of our decadence is the loss of faith in religion—specifically the Christian religion, but more generally, in metaphysics. You've written a couple of books about religion—*Bad Religion*, about American heresies, and a more recent one critical of Pope Francis. Is it possible to recover from decadence without religious revival? In what form might religious revival come to us?

Ross Douthat: Barzun writes of the decadent society that "the loss it faces is that of Possibility," and clearly a failing faith in the transcendent is a big part of that: if you cease to believe that you are part of a story, that history is more than just one damn thing after another, then you are more likely to sink into repetitive cycles and be overtaken by futility.

Certainly, both the American heresies I wrote about in *Bad Religion* and the Francis-era Catholic Church are marked by decadence. In the case of Catholicism, you have a combination of slow decline, disillusioning scandals, and seemingly unresolvable liberal-conservative deadlocks—

with Francis himself, strikingly, increasingly bringing us back to that deadlock (as in his recent refusal on married priests) after spending the first few years of his pontificate pushing in a more revolutionary direction. In the case of popular heresies, meanwhile, you have a striking failure to build new churches and institutions: the self-appointed religious visionaries of 19th century America gave us Mormondom and Christian Science and the Jehovah's Witnesses and more; their heirs and heiresses today mostly just have lifestyle brands.

So yes, although I offer a lot of different ideas for how decadence might end, my assumption is that a religious revival, in some institutional and not just individualized form, seems likely. As for where it might come from—well, it might be that the atomization and isolation of post-religious and post-familial life, pushed further over the next generation and exacerbated by the internet, will create a renewed opportunity for Christian evangelization as people feel the loss of community more palpably. Or it might be that the obvious intellectual tensions and contradictions in elite secularism, which are already giving us a kind of religious rebellion in the form of the "Great Awokening," will create opportunities for the Christian synthesis to be proposed anew. Or there might be some actual pagan or pantheist synthesis waiting to emerge. Or change might come from outside; who knows what the Chinese religious landscape will look like in 20 years, or the landscape of Europe in 50?

All that said, it's easy to invent scenarios, but as someone once put it, we know not the day or the hour: the timing and nature of the next religious revival is known to God alone.

Rod Dreher: Finishing *The Decadent Society* made me even more confident in the Benedict Option as a kind of solution—that is, ceasing to care about rescuing an order that is beyond saving, and instead trying to focus on building up local forms of (religious) community within which people of faith can live out the decline and fall. If one were to read *The Benedict Option* and *The Decadent Society* in succession, and to ask himself, "What should I do now?"—what would be the most reasonable conclusion?

Ross Douthat: I think it depends on your position in life, your age and obligations, and your place within the various hierarchies of our society. My sense is that BenOp approaches, broadly defined, are a really important way to resist decadence at the local level, with families and churches and communities as seedbeds for growth and creativity and dynamism. At the same time, part of my argument is that renaissance comes from things happening at multiple levels all at once—so there's a place for people working for political realignments, for artists and intellectuals embedded in ossified institutions and trying to transform them from within, and from people working in the one clear area of continuing dynamism, Silicon Valley, and trying to direct its wealth and power toward humane innovations and explorations rather than just simulation. So I think the Benedict Option offers a starting point or foundation for renewal to the extent that it remains somewhat outward-looking, not just defensive—and also the extent that it doesn't just confine itself to pastoralist concerns (as important as those are) but also recognizes that ours is an urbanized and technological civilization and likely to remain one, and so a vocation to the city and the university and the laboratory and even the start-up incubator should not be disdained.

Rod Dreher: Last question: where do you find hope?

Ross Douthat: In the palpable desire of many people, right and left, populist and socialist and Catholic-integralist, for a different kind of politics—as risky as that different kind of politics might be!—than just the technocratic management of decadence. In the eagerness of Silicon Valley billionaires, whose power and influence I dislike in many ways, to spend at least some of their money on possibly-futile efforts to catapult us further into space. In the exceptions to film industry decadence like Paweł Pawlikowski and Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck and the Coen Brothers. In my own three-going-on-four children and the big families that make noise in our parish every Sunday Mass. In the fact that I spent the day after my book's release, Ash Wednesday, walking the streets of oh-so-secular Manhattan, and there were ashed foreheads everywhere I looked—a sign that whatever may be wrong with American Christianity, there's also life in those dry bones yet. ■

Mourning in America

The decadence of technological civilization lies in its worship of quantity over quality.

by **WALTER MCDOUGALL**

As I type these words the whole of Italy is under lockdown and thousands of northern Italians are perishing from the novel coronavirus. (I pray such a die-off will not have occurred in the United States by the time this is published.) But in happier times, in fact the year 2014, I finally agreed to take a long break from teaching and research and accompany my wife on a tour of Italy. I write "accompany" because she did all the logistics and planning and I just followed her lead like an eager puppy on a bye in a park full of new sniffs. To call the experience sublime does not do it justice. Italy's history, art, architecture, scenery, culture, and cuisine repeatedly moved me to tears. But another, more mundane contretemps also lodged in my memory. We were dining *al fresco* at a seaside *trattoria* in the picturesque Cinque Terre, chatting with the retired English couple at the next table, when there suddenly fell upon me a peace, a release, a sense of being unburdened that was new to my frenetic American soul. I realized what it meant for Italians, Britons, indeed all Europeans, to be retired from Great Power politics and steeped in *la dolce vita*. I couldn't help thinking, if this is decadence please give me more. Thus was I prepared to appreciate one of the principal messages in Ross Douthat's new book, *The Decadent Society: How We Became the Victims of Our Own Success*.

The message is that decadence need not connote debauchery or an impending doom of some kind, but instead may connote a blissful and remarkably sustainable state of mind. "Perhaps the task of sustaining decadence," writes Douthat, "is the task that we—we the fortunate—we the long-lived, we the spoiled—should want our leaders to pursue." As the perceptive political scientist James Kurth once taught me, it is a blessed privilege to bask in the *Alpenglow* of a fading civilization. Yes, but only so long as one does not too often ask: what *follows* the evening?

It is not my intention to review *The Decadent Society*, since the preceding conversation between the author and Rod Dreher pithily describes its central themes. Second, I am disqualified from reviewing an author of whom (full disclosure) I have long been an admiring fan. Third, I feel a certain kinship with him inasmuch as we are both Christian conservatives in progressive institutions. Fourth, I can scarcely claim objectivity since Douthat writes, on page two of his book: "In *The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age*, his magisterial narrative of the period, Walter McDougall...." So my intention here is simply to add my own observations regarding American decadence.

Discourses about decadence are familiar to historians and are as old as Thucydides. I myself first encountered the term in a work by Pierre Renouvin, the dean of French diplomatic historians in the mid-20th century, who simply titled his book on the collapse of the Third Republic *La Décadence, 1932-1939*. His argument was that the polarization, decay, failure of nerve, and stagnation of French domestic society and culture paralleled the paralysis of French foreign policy. As late as 1936, the French still possessed the power to call Hitler's bluffs. But their republic suffered from a political palsy even more severe than that of Britain or the United States. French leftists launched waves of bitter strikes and brawled in the streets against the right-wing *Action Française*. Cabinets rose and fell in a dizzy succession. When Nazi Germany remilitarized and reoccupied the Rhineland, France was frozen in place. In any event, almost no civil or military leader believed it necessary to resist, because the French War Ministry had spent millions of francs constructing the notorious (because presumably impregnable) Maginot Line of fortresses on the German frontier.

Indeed, France in the 1930s displayed many of the characteristics which Jacques Barzun would describe in his 2000 book *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life, 1500 to the Present* and which Douthat now spies in the United States. They include "economic stagnation, institutional decay, and cultural and intellectual exhaustion." Today, Renouvin's thesis has become conventional wisdom. The "strange defeat"

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A Grumman artist's impression of Neil Armstrong walking on the Moon during Apollo 11 *Space Frontiers / Stringer (Getty Images)*

suffered by France in 1940 was not strange at all, but was presaged in the decadence draining interwar France.

Historians of international politics such as myself are familiar with the concept because it is invariably found in literature purporting to explain the "decline and fall" of nations and empires over time. For instance, Paul Kennedy's 1987 book *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* singled out "imperial overstretch," resource depletion, and strategic fatigue as central factors in the collapse of modern great powers, warning at the end that the United States might be facing its own imminent decline. The book was an instant bestseller, but fell out of favor just four years later when the Soviet Union collapsed and the United States became the "sole superpower." By 2009, however, Kennedy had been vindicated by the botched overreactions to 9/11 (wars in Afghanistan and Iraq) and the onset of the Great Recession, which revived the discourse over American decline.

Such forebodings are not new in our history. Two recent examples include the Great Depression of the 1930s, the only era when the United States truly turned isolationist, and the Great Stagflation of the 1970s, when Nixon and Ford pursued detente with the Communist powers and Carter made his so-called "malaise speech." Yet those doleful decades were followed by stunning reversals of fortune under Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan. Might Americans be on the cusp of a similar "Renaissance"—to employ Douthat's own term—that would restore productivity, vitality, unity, and creativity to the United States? He does not dismiss that possibility, nor does he dismiss the possibility of catastrophes such as a war against China, a terminal economic collapse, or an authoritarian overthrow of the government. But the burden of his evidence suggests that for a variety of reasons both secular and contingent, we are trapped in a futile feedback loop of our own making (hence his subtitle) and that the best the nation can do is just to sustain a decadent, if comfortable status quo: the mood I felt on that sultry evening in Italy.

Curiously, Douthat begins (and ends) his book with a paean to the exploration of outer space because he takes for granted that the Apollo moon program exemplifies the sort of thing healthy societies do. They dream and aspire, mobilize their intellectual, technical, and economic resources, and above all explore. For him the first moon landing is an apt benchmark because he argues that many of the trends which have led to our current torpor began around the time the moon programs ended. "Before Apollo," he writes, "it was easy to imagine that 'late' was a misnomer for our phase of modernity, that our civilization's story was really in its early days, that the earthbound empires of Europe and America were just a

first act in a continuous drama of expansion and development. Since Apollo we have entered into decadence."

His larger argument is indisputable. But my own study of American space policy persuaded me that Apollo itself was already evidence of a sort of decadence. It reflected the adolescent pursuit of prestige which future Librarian of Congress Daniel Boorstin described in *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, which was published in 1961, the very year President Kennedy launched the moon program. Following the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957, the Eisenhower administration founded NASA, whose first Administrator T. Keith Glennan and Deputy Administrator Hugh Dryden designed a sensibly paced R&D program for the step-by-step development of rocket boosters, satellites, and manned and unmanned spacecraft regardless of what spectacular "space shots" the Russians might make. But Kennedy hijacked most of the NASA budget for a one-time "space race" to win propaganda points. His audience was world opinion, especially in the Third World, and he meant to prove the superiority of American technology and the capitalist system. (Never mind that government-funded command technology for political purposes eerily resembled the communism it was meant to oppose.) As Boorstin put it, "when the gods wish to punish us they make us believe our own advertising." As I myself put it, "The concomitant arrival of Sputnik and the Third World ... made it seem vital for the United States to present an image of progressive anti-colonialism." But this meant "an extension to foreign policy of a *decadence* (italics added) in the United States that was the subject of Boorstin's book."

The same technocratic mentality that inspired Apollo drove Kennedy's progressive advisers to design the Vietnam War and Great Society under Lyndon Johnson. The ironic upshot was that by the time the first moon landing happened, American prestige had been clobbered by the quagmire in Southeast Asia and burning ghettos and student riots at home. The space program never recovered. NASA's budget began to fall sharply even before 1969 and manned spaceflight might have disappeared altogether if not for Nixon's adoption of the Space Shuttle, itself a compromised turkey with no future. Apollo had been a dead end. If instead the program of stable expenditures on practical space infrastructure had been continued, the United States might have had permanent stations in orbit and on the moon, plus privatized civilian space technologies, by the 1980s. So much for my special pleading.

Douthat describes the symptoms of our national decadence in four pithy chapters. The first symptom is economic stagnation resulting from the demographic aging of the population, runaway national debt, the collapse of educational standards, and the surprising loss of American technological dynamism. The second is sterility resulting from the natural drop in the birthrate of a wealthy information-age society, but also from feminism, abortion, divorce, the decline of marriage, and the soaring cost of child-rearing. The third is sclerosis most obviously displayed in the paralysis of a gridlocked government that used to win world wars but today cannot even pass a normal budget. Douthat cites Steven Teles's term "kludgeocracy" to describe a system in which every solution is really "an inelegant patch put in place to solve an unexpected problem." (Our dysfunctional politics is surely to blame, but I suspect this is also a function of the stochastic complexity of a high-tech, globalized world beyond anyone's understanding, much less control.) The fourth symptom is repetition, being a lazy lack of creativity reflected in Hollywood's habit of making "remakes of remakes." To be sure, some great films are still being produced (three of my recent favorites are *Mr.[Sherlock] Holmes*, *The Two Popes*, and *Ford v Ferrari*), but most movies, rap music, and what passes for art and architecture are not only decadent, but dreadful.

Douthat's middle chapters develop his original and fetching thesis to the effect that decadence is sustainable. But one reason why is that our population, especially our youth, has become addicted and benumbed by the internet, social media, iPhones, and computer games. Interestingly, the spread of pornography-on-demand and violent video games have correlated with sharp *decreases* in rape and crime, but also account for a huge drop-off of interest in real sex and even real people. Likewise in politics it seems as if radical, even violent, movements on the Left and Right metastasize on social media. But in fact, Douthat argues, Americans who spew venom online are usually just "cosplaying" their frustrations, in which case their posts and tweets are harmless (if hateful) substitutes for political action.

What is more, the same technologies have empowered government agencies to conduct nearly total surveillance and made social control one task our decrepit government agencies do very well. Social control is also exercised through the Orwellian groupthink—the political correctness, identity politics, and "wokeness"—imposed through our cultural institutions, universities, news media, and corporations. It all amounts to what James Poulos calls the "pink police state"; what I called "friendly fascism" (while visiting Disney World years ago); and what Douthat calls "kindly despotism." Its purpose is to suppress civil liberties that enable resistance and protect those that enable self-indulgence. Even war is made tamable thanks to deployment of satellites, drones, aircraft, and volunteer special forces. Douthat concludes: "the more surgically precise the intervention, the more sustainable it becomes. With enough technique, the forever war can last forever." This is good stuff. As Rod Dreher would surely write: *read the whole thing.*

My only objection to Douthat's diagnosis is that it has little or nothing to say about elites, establishments, and plutocracies. I believe Americans have become decadent in good part because they have chosen to do so, but I also believe it is not paranoid to suggest the choices we make are rarely free ones. Rather, we are constantly tempted, manipulated, by those who occupy the commanding heights and who grasp the levers of power. That is why I recommend readers to pair *The Decadent Society* with James Kurth's new book *The American Way of Empire: How America Won a World—But Lost Her Way*. Among much else, Kurth describes the "preferred domestic public policies" as well as the foreign policies of three American plutocracies. The first rose to power in the 1880s and 1890s on the strength of industrial sectors such as coal, steel, railroads, and oil. Its captains of industry, or "robber barons," wanted a political system that seemed bracingly democratic, but in fact ensured that both political parties would do their bidding by supporting the gold standard, protective tariffs, a big navy, and foreign markets through the "Open Door" policy. The second American plutocracy that arose in the 1920s and 1930s was split between industry and the financial sector which rose like a rocket during and after the Great War. Wall Street favored free trade and internationalism and thus quarreled with the industrialists of the Middle West. When the Great Depression hit both were hurt badly, but did not succumb to populist or leftist movements thanks to Franklin Roosevelt, World War II, and Harry Truman.

The third American plutocracy is dominated by the financial sector, which hollowed out American industry, not only by promoting free trade overseas, but by promoting multinational corporations after 1960 and globalization after 1990. So we have our plutocracy to thank for the Rust Belt with its abandoned working class. The most scandalous proof of its power to manipulate public policy is Washington's response to the Great Recession caused by the greed of the financial sector beginning in 2008. Nearly all the "too big to fail" financial institutions were awarded generous bailouts funded by ordinary taxpayers or else tacked onto the national debt (which doubled under George W. Bush and doubled again under Barack Obama).

Less apparent is the plutocracy's manipulation of American culture. Business elites who were once "country-club Republicans" have become the most progressive as well as powerful people in the world. What appears to have happened is this. As veterans of the radical 1960s completed their "Long March through the institutions," they seized the commanding heights in politics, law, academics, journalism, and the foundations. Once in positions of authority, the "tenured radicals" imposed their multicultural, intersectional, non-binary "race, class, gender, and sexual orientation" template and made it the new "hegemonic discourse." Over those same decades corporations signaled their eagerness to promote the progressive *social* agendas so long as they remained free to promote their *economic* agendas. Hence the neoliberalism, globalization, and deregulation of the financial sector proceeded apace with no serious challenge from the Left until Bernie Sanders in 2016. Meanwhile, the new billionaires of the tech industry—who were already "woke"—not only joined the plutocracy but contributed to it the means to anesthetize the "deplorables" in the hinterland. Not that the founders of Microsoft, Apple, Google, Facebook, and the rest of those veritable *sovereignties* intended to exercise dystopian social control but, having done so, are not about to let go of their algorithms.

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, what may happen next is a mystery. But Douthat thinks a radical revolution in the United States is extremely unlikely given that its population is much richer and older than those of say, late Imperial Russia or Weimar Germany, and is atomized and tranquilized by the internet. Instead, he hopes for a renaissance inspired, perhaps, by simultaneous scientific and religious revivals, because "there can also be a mysterious alchemy between the two forms of human exploration. And nothing will be a surer sign that decadence has ended in something like a renaissance than if that alchemy suddenly returns."

Could it be that we are already seeing evidence of that alchemy in the war our public *and* private sectors are waging together against the virus? For the prayers of so many is that God will providentially bless the efforts of the scientists, physicians, politicians, and bureaucrats seeking wise measures of containment and above all a vaccine. I suppose it will depend on what Americans do when and if Providence comes to their rescue. Will most simply sigh in relief, utter a quick prayer of thanks, and rush back to enjoyable decadence? In *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, his little classic on the so-called Dark Ages following the fall of the Roman Empire, Thomas Cahill quotes cultural historian Kenneth Clark to the effect that "Civilization requires confidence—confidence in the society in which one lives, belief in its philosophy, belief in its laws, and confidence in one's own mental powers.... Vigour, energy, vitality: all the great civilizations—or civilizing epochs—have had a weight of energy behind them." Can Americans recover that confidence and display that energy *after* this emergency has passed? Will a critical mass of them come to realize (as Robert Pirsig wrote in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*) that the decadence of a technological civilization lies in its worship of Quantity over Quality?

I believe we shall know that postmodern America has begun to exit *La Décadence* only when her people embrace faith, hope, and charity, and begin to create beauty again. ■

Joe Biden: Candidate of Fear

He's the symbol of a bygone era.

by **DANIEL McCARTHY**

The Democratic Party is decadent, its future stillborn as its past seizes ownership of its backward-looking present. In 2020, the party is set to nominate for president a man who wasn't good enough for the nomination in 1988 or 2008. Has he acquired a new vision or new vigor? No, but his party has run out of options.

Joe Biden is the candidate of old age and fear. Nostalgia for the Obama administration has been his prime selling point in the Democratic primaries, and it certainly helped him to win the support of African-American voters. But Biden is Barack Obama's antithesis. In 2008 Obama truly was the candidate of "hope and change," in the sense that he did represent a new page in American politics—he was a one-term senator, not mired in the ways of Washington like his rivals Hillary Clinton and John McCain (or Joe Biden, for that matter, who also ran for president that year); he was to be the first African-American president, providing hope that racial division could be overcome and inspiring young people of color to the highest aspirations; and his policy agenda seemed to be a break with the low expectations of what could be achieved at home and the excessively high expectations of what force could achieve abroad. However poorly the hopes panned out, and what little change succeeded, there was no doubting what Obama symbolized when he was first elected.

And Joe Biden? He's a symbol that people as old as the Baby Boomers—or, in fact, a few years older—can still dominate national politics, especially in the Democratic Party. Though the 77-year-old Biden is a year younger than Bernie Sanders, he was the old man of the Democratic race in two senses that count for more than his birthday. First, Biden, not Sanders, was the candidate of experience, the one who made his pitch based most of all on his biography, not his plans and policy dreams; Sanders was the candidate of the dream, despite his own decades-long tenure in public life. Second, Sanders was the candidate that young voters preferred; Biden needed not only African-Americans but older Americans in order to become the party's presumptive nominee. The problem for Democrats here is not necessarily what happens in November 2020, but rather how cohesive the party will be even if Biden can win. Does a Democratic Party led by a 78-year-old President Biden and an 80-year-old Speaker Pelosi have any future in a post-Boomer America?

Democrats have long taken for granted the advantage they expect to gain from America's generational ethnic transformation: as whites become a smaller majority, and in more and more places are reduced to an electoral plurality, the minority voting blocs that have proved loyal to the Democrats should provide them with permanent power. Yet this is no longer a safe bet if the Democratic Party splinters ideologically, and the ability of leaders like Biden and Pelosi to appeal to the young leftists of all races who supported Bernie Sanders is very much open to doubt. To win elections with one set of voters, while a completely different set of voters holds the future of your party, is apt to be a Pyrrhic, and most temporary, victory.

The dead hand of the past lies heavy on the whole country, not just the Democratic Party. Since 1992, Americans have consistently elected Washington outsiders to the White House. Bill Clinton had no national experience when he won that year. George W. Bush had none when he was elected in 2000. Barack Obama had been in the Senate only four years when he won in 2008. And Donald Trump had no prior experience of holding office of any kind when he became president. Although considerable continuities emerged throughout the administrations of George H.W. Bush (a true Washington insider), Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama—all supported the project of a "liberal world order," in which the United States was embroiled in

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Joe Biden and Hillary Clinton in 2016 *BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP via Getty Images*

foreign conflicts, while globalization was their imperative in economics—voters at each election demanded something new and different from the previous status quo. Clinton was certainly not elected because voters wanted more of what Bush I gave them; Bush II was not elected over Clinton's vice president, Al Gore, because voters wanted to extend the Clinton era; and Obama was elected in explicit repudiation of Bush II. Donald Trump, of course, was the leader the country turned to in order to repudiate all of the above: Trump was as bold in his criticism of George W. Bush for the Iraq war, and of earlier Republicans for NAFTA, as he was in his attacks on Barack Obama's record.

None of the other successful presidential contenders of the last 30 years has presented himself as a champion of an earlier status quo or a force for restoring Washington to its old ways. Even George W. Bush campaigned on a newfangled "compassionate conservatism," not a return to Reaganism (or to the 1994 spirit of Newt Gingrich). While it's possible that in 2020 Americans really will want to reverse the tides of time—after the misery of the COVID-19 experience and in reaction against the changes in government that Trump has instituted—the Obama legacy was not so potent in 2016 as to elect Hillary Clinton, and in four years under Joe Biden it is not going to get any fresher. Whatever opportunities this may present to Republicans and Sanders-style Democrats after 2020, for the country it will mean being stuck with an agenda and governing vision that had proved its limitations by 2016. The same conditions that led to the rise of Donald Trump's populism and Bernie Sanders's socialist movement that year will be established again under Biden, and after Biden those forces might take on much stronger forms than they did after Obama.

The Trump and Sanders phenomena have happened for a reason, after all. They happened because "hope and change" failed to deliver on its promises, and with Hillary Clinton there was no hope of anything other than stagnation. Trump and Sanders, in very different ways, represented new hopes and a defiance of stagnation. Biden, by contrast, offers no future at all. That includes a future in which he's re-elected, age 81, in 2024. Who can imagine such a thing?

The near certainty that Joe Biden could only serve a single term if elected as president makes his choice of vice president a fateful one. That person will be the presumptive frontrunner for the 2024 Democratic nomination, and voters will take that into account when they cast their ballots this November. Should Biden win, he will be a lame duck from Day 1. Quite apart from whatever drawbacks his running mate will have in her own right (if Biden follows through on his pledge to

pick a woman), the idea of electing a placeholder president for four years is not likely to sit very well with the American people. It would be an extraordinary abdication of leadership. And it's not as if anyone would look to leadership in Congress to fill the gap. Nor, given the limitations of the office, would a vice president looking ahead to 2024 have the power to supply needed leadership before then. Quite the contrary: the vice president would be a target for everyone's criticisms, Republicans and rival Democrats alike.

This is hardly a scenario for a return to stability and "competence" in government, as Donald Trump's critics say they want. It's equivalent instead to not having a president at all for four years—which may sound like a libertarian's fantasy, except that the administrative state would continue to pursue an aggressively progressive agenda during the interim. That too can only contribute to populist resurgence.

For all the debilities that come with being the candidate of old age, there are advantages, too. Biden is not running as the paladin of the emerging Democratic Party, a party whose socialism and identity politics have been consistent losers at the ballot box—including, for the most part, in the 2018 midterms, and including in the Democratic presidential race this year. Biden is a survivor from an older, more broadly popular Democratic Party, one that still had powerful support in white working-class communities, such as those in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin that will be as decisive in 2020 as they were in 2016. For many voters of the Baby Boom generation, Biden is the third coming of the president they grew up idolizing, John F. Kennedy. JFK was the president they wished they could be, a glamorous symbol of America before Vietnam and Watergate. (Never mind that JFK actually deepend the country's involvement in Vietnam.) Bill Clinton, who like JFK claimed an Irish ancestry—though one which in Bill's case has never been proved—was the first Boomer elected president, and at 43 was just a year older than JFK had been when he was elected. Like JFK, Clinton had celebrity charm; and if he was a womanizer, too, that just went with the type.

For many voters of the Baby Boom generation, Biden is the third coming of the president they grew up idolozing: Kennedy. JFK was the president they wished they could be.

Now Biden represents the same Boomer vision in maturity, even if he's a few years too old to be a Boomer himself. Like Clinton, he also makes an unverifiable claim to Irish ancestry. Like Kennedy, he identifies as Roman Catholic. (And yes, like Kennedy and Clinton, he has been accused of mistreating women, and worse.) Biden is a callback to the Boomer memory of America—the look and feel of the country in the late 20th century, when white ethnics (Irish, Italians, Poles, and others) who had been at the margins earlier in the century now helped to define the mainstream, even occupying the highest office in the land. To elect Biden at 77 is, perhaps to some of these voters, a way of showing that they still matter in a country whose future will look very different. Much is made by Trump's critics of the racial dimension to his support; but ethnic and generational identification with Biden should not be overlooked. Indeed, as a candidate who hopes to unite white ethnics and blacks, Biden is a throwback to the Democratic Party of an earlier age, too.

As the candidate of fear, Biden aims at a quite different segment of the electorate. Fear is what motivates upper middle class, highly educated voters. This professional class, filling as it does the ranks of journalism and the academy, presents itself as anything but fearful—according to its propaganda, fear is really hate, and hate is something that only deplorables experience, at least as a political emotion. Liberals will admit to being personally afraid, or worried for their communities, as a result of the horrors they believe Donald Trump has unleashed on the land. But only a populist demagogue, or maybe sometimes a socialist one, tries to capitalize on fear. Good liberal politicians are always about hope and change. Obama only made the slogan explicit. (In fact, "hope" was a byword of Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign as well, which drew attention to the name his birthplace: Hope, Arkansas.)

Yet liberalism is the politics of fear in the most profound sense: it is an ideology that attempts to neutralize fear through the all-provident power of the state, guided by enlightened leadership. The fear that men and women traditionally feel on account of religion—fear of God's wrath or fear of a universe without any order—is allayed by liberalism's programmatic commitment to science and to rationalism more generally. Everything will have a rational explanation, yet that rational explanation will somehow be moral, too. What is important is that fear can be forgotten, without the need for any unearthly power to supply salvation. Instead, a supreme earthly power will remove all earthly worries: fear of want, fear of violent death, even fear of disease. The state is not the only institution that will meet these needs: for many liberals, the free market or science outside of government plays the greater role

in provision. But the state at a minimum supplies the rules that make possible the efficient operation of the rest of liberal society.

And the state rests on a psychological foundation best explained by Thomas Hobbes. No doubt Joe Biden has given little thought to the 17th-century philosopher from Malmesbury, England. Most liberals do not think of themselves as Hobbesians, and a great many denounce Hobbes as an authoritarian or worse. But he understood that a politics suitable for a modern society has to prioritize fear, and its negation, over other emotions and their gratification. Other passions disturb the peace; but fear, particularly the fear of a violent death, can compel men to be reasonable. Fear of this kind is nigh universally felt, and its effects are quite predictable: people will support a power—an institution—that can protect them from violence.

By itself, that's not a formula for liberalism. And what liberal society does with Hobbes's political psychology is different from what he himself advised should be done in works like Leviathan. Liberals accept a great deal of competition and pluralism of many kinds, but what makes the competition and diversity possible is its harmlessness. The passions are allowed free rein, but only as long as they are weaker than the fear of violent death that holds society together.

To say that populism has a passion that is stronger than the fear of violent death would be going too far. But populism does involve a very strong passion for dignity, a desire for greater recognition of one's status or plight—one's humanity, in a felt and not just formally acknowledged sense. This passion is what most deeply offends the upper-middle-class opponents of populism in general and Trump in particular. They sense that this passion is the beginning of a different kind of politics, and has the potential to supplant the foundations of the old liberal system if it's not checked. Populism has an understanding of human psychology and human nature different from those of liberalism, and such different foundations lead to different forms of politics and theories of the state.

Joe Biden's voters have passions of their own, and they are no doubt usually sincere in saying that they are moved by a desire for justice or decency or fairness or any number of other objects of feeling. But all of those passions have been trimmed to fit the context of fear—the context of a political system in which fear has been negated but remains central, for should some other emotion displace it at the center of political psychology, the logic of the rest of the system would fail. The logic of competition for status or dignity looks very different from the logic of escaping from fear. The Trump phenomenon and populism threaten to upset this balance. This is why revolutionary or fascistic implications are attached to Trump's politics by his detractors. Trump and his supporters are very far from being fascists, but their opponents believe that their emotional core, and their scale of passions, is inevitably incipiently fascistic.

Biden is the candidate for an America less concerned with dignity and more prepared to enjoy the fruits of a political psychology based on neutralizing fear. Under President Biden, the welfare state, science, and even the free market will continue to keep the fear of death at bay, and that will make room for mild pleasures: pornography and video games and varied cuisine and recreational activities of all sorts. Joe Biden's louche son Hunter—known for his hearty indulgence in drugs and his sexual adventures with strippers—is a perfect specimen of humanity under this system. If he gets more stimulation than others, everyone else should get enough. And if they don't, they mustn't complain, they should ask for a program.

For all that liberals complain about Donald Trump's affairs, or his great wealth, what exercises their ire the most is his spirit, which isn't satisfied with creature comfort. His supporters are also motivated by something other than what liberalism can easily satisfy. (And this holds true whether we are talking about the nationalists or the Christian conservatives among his base.) Fear should have no competitor as the sovereign passion in a good, rational liberal order, but in Trump the glimmer of competition can be seen. In Joe Biden, however, there is no such danger: he sprinkles oil over turbulent waters, promising as he does only "competence" and more moderate politics. Yet here too, Biden's supporters are too quick to address an immediate concern without looking to more serious long-term difficulties—for what Trump, and in a different way Bernie Sanders, indicates is that the liberal order has become too dessicated of humanity and feeling, too mechanical, too perfect. And so it courts a backlash, of which populism is not so much a manifestation, but an antibody.

American voters have tried to add new humanity to the nation's politics in every presidential election since the end of the Cold War. They believed Bill Clinton when he said, "I feel your pain." They gave a "compassionate" conservative a chance, and afterwards they demanded more "hope and change." When that effort, too, succumbed to the inertia and decadence of Washington, voters turned to Donald Trump, the most decisive break from politics past. Now Joe Biden asks them to turn back, give up, and accept our country's senility. ■

Statecraft Is *Still* Soulcraft

Character education is a pre-condition for self-government.

by **ANDY SMARICK**

America's political square has taken ill. A recent survey found that 91 percent of Americans believe we are divided over politics; another showed that 58 percent have little or no confidence that their fellow citizens can have a civil conversation with those holding different views. This has infected the way we discuss public affairs: 85 percent of Americans say that over the last several years, political debates have become less respectful; 76 percent say they've become less fact-based.

These sentiments are ultimately related to how we see our governing institutions. Only 17 percent of Americans believe Washington can be trusted to do the right thing all or most of the time. That's down from three-quarters of Americans just a half century ago. Citizens' concerns are aimed at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. Only 3 in 10 Americans say this president is honest and trustworthy. Congressional approval has been below 30 percent for a decade. Perhaps most worrying, 70 percent of Americans believe that our low trust in one another inhibits our ability to solve problems.

All of this endangers our ability to self-rule. Democracy, especially in a continental, pluralist nation where individual freedom is prized, requires that we demonstrate curiosity when participating in public debates, show accommodation to opponents, demonstrate restraint, and engage with integrity. In other words, a certain set of beliefs and behaviors are an essential component of governing the American republic. Indeed, in a 2016 paper for the Brookings Institution, scholars Richard V. Reeves and Dimitrios Halikias make the case—reasoning from arguments made 150 years earlier by philosopher John Stuart Mill—that sustaining the institutions of liberal democracies depends on the character of their citizens.

If one role of public education is to preserve our institutions and norms, then the development of character must be among its responsibilities. In other words, we must form young people committed to and capable of conserving our invaluable governing patrimony. However, during my nearly two decades of working on education policy at the state and federal level, in both the legislative and executive branches, I have been struck by how seldom the issues of character and virtue come up in discussions of statutes, regulations, and other forms of official government action. Such matters have certainly never emerged as a policy priority.

This is conspicuous because the K-12 policy debate is lively. During the past two decades, America has had heated discussions about accountability (e.g., standards, testing, performance reporting, teacher evaluation), equity (funding formulas, special education, re-segregation), choice (charters, vouchers, tax credits), and much more. But none of these conversations necessarily touches on the skills and beliefs related to participating fruitfully in our common affairs.

This is not to say that educators ignore character and virtue. In fact, teachers can model virtue and subtly form the character of students in a hundred different ways a day. As Stacey Edmonson, Robert Tatman, and John R. Slate argue in the insightful, comprehensive "Character Education: An Historical Overview," educators in America and elsewhere have long considered moral and ethical development a key component of schooling, though political and social trends evolve and complicate what this actually means in practice.

But as we move from the classroom to the broader social, political, and policy conversations of schooling, it seems as though our willingness to engage explicitly in these issues evaporates. We feel comfortable talking about dates, facts, individuals, and theories of authority, but we are loath to talk about civic virtue.

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Civic virtue might be thought of as the sensibilities and actions of citizens that contribute to a good society. A similar definition describes it as the set of personal qualities associated with the effective functioning of the civil and political order. Embedded in this concept is the idea that individuals have not just personal rights but also obligations to the community. This means that a citizen must think and act beyond him or herself; it also means that this thinking and acting should be tethered to a collective understanding of the common good.

So there are at least two ethical dimensions to civic virtue: how we ought to act and what constitutes a healthy community. A similar concept is "character," which has been concisely defined by Anne Snyder in *The Fabric of Character* as "a set of dispositions to be and do good." In the context of public affairs, character can be thought of as the personal attributes that align a citizen's thoughts and actions with civic virtue.

Over time, education scholars have attempted to clarify the meaning of character by describing its component parts. In his 2011 *Phi Delta Kappan* essay "Character as the Aim of Education," David Light Shields offers four categories of character in a manner especially helpful to the discussion of schooling. First, referencing Ron Ritchhart's work, Shields discusses "intellectual" character. This is knowledge, but it's more than the mere accumulation of content. It extends to developing the personal dispositions that enable continued learning—traits like curiosity, open-mindedness, and skepticism.

A second is "performance" character—a set of habits "that enable an individual to accomplish intentions and goals." This includes diligence, courage, initiative, and determination. Performance character is often described as "enabling excellence." That is, young people, if they are to succeed in school and beyond, need to learn how to willingly engage in challenging work, stick with difficult tasks until successful completion, and bounce back after failure. In terms of productive engagement in public affairs in a diverse democracy, these skills will help budding citizens participate in sensitive but essential debates; work through complicated, arduous political processes; and continue to engage after losing a bruising policy battle.

The rub, however, is that intellectual and performance character can be worryingly agnostic regarding substance. Curiosity will help a student collect a great deal of information, but it won't tell her what is good or bad. Likewise, an open mind can be filled with either wholesome or wicked ideas. One could courageously engage in either humane or inhumane reform, doggedly fight for either a just or unjust cause, and show great initiative for either charity or cruelty.

This is why a third category is necessary—what many have called "moral" character. Shields refers to it as "a disposition to seek the good and right." Such a disposition can guide our application of curiosity, skepticism, confidence, and determination. Moral character can include an understanding of justice and enduring ethical rules, as well as honesty, integrity, humility, duty, gratitude, and respect. These values can help young people understand why equal opportunity is invaluable, why prudent language in debate is important, why discrimination based on protected classes is unlawful, why spreading false information is wrong, why societies develop policies to protect innocent life, why just-war theory shields noncombatants, and much more. When done right, the combination of intellectual, performance, and moral character can help young people mature and develop essential citizenship skills.

But the education community can become squeamish when the term "moral character" is raised. A principal, school board member, or state legislator might worry that principles-based lessons about right and wrong inevitably invite religion into the classroom. They can worry that discussing natural rights could make some students and families uncomfortable. And as Reeves and Halikias argue, some liberals see state-sponsored instruction on character as paternalistic, impinging on individuals' right to determine for themselves the nature of the good life and how to pursue it. In short, for those involved in public schooling, it can be far safer to focus on intellectual and performance character than moral character.

Understanding this fact can help us better appreciate a number of trends in public schooling. For instance, the recent infatuation with "grit" and "resilience"—often thought of as encompassing pluck, passion, and perseverance—seems an obvious manifestation of our preference for teaching performance character rather than moral character. Grit and resilience can tell us how to start moving, leap over obstacles, and pop back up when we fall, but they are muted about the destination.

The upshot for public life is troubling. To illustrate, take the many prominent political figures who behave in ethically objectionable ways but do so with great gumption and gusto. If we only teach young people about performance character, we have to concede that such public figures have demonstrated confidence, courage, initiative, and determination. But we are left without the vocabulary to critique their mendacity, carelessness, cruelty, vulgarity, and intemperance.

Likewise, in the place of specific language of moral character, we've substituted terms like "social justice" and "equity." Though adjacent to morality, these concepts are

ambiguous and subject to flexible interpretation. The meaning of "social justice" has been strenuously debated for decades and, to this day, its definition is still contested. Nobel laureate F.A. Hayek called the term a "mirage." And though some today associate it with a progressive political agenda, it has roots in the teachings of Catholic social thought that elevate elements of individual duty and community solidarity. Similarly, "equity" is often in the eye of the beholder. It can be invoked by those advocating for either equal opportunity or equal results; a Rawlsian or Nozickian approach to redistribution; the rule of law or predetermined "fair" outcomes.

In the cases of both social justice and equity, we end up with pleasant-sounding terms that fail to provide future citizens with adequate direction on the content of admirable behavior. Thus, even if we produce gritty and resilient students, they may still lack an understanding of what they ought to apply their grit and resilience toward once they are in the public square.

This challenge is brought to a fine point—and a potential solution is adumbrated—by Shields's fourth and final category of character: "civic." Here, he notes that a thriving nation requires the active participation of citizens; that active citizens must possess an appreciation of the common good; and that working toward the common good entails collaborative, civic work. He also contends that society should expect public schools to produce graduates capable of engaging in this process by cultivating civic character. According to Shields, elements of such character include "respect for freedom, equality, and rationality; an appreciation of diversity and due process; an ethic of participation and service; and the skills to build the social capital of trust and community." To that list I would add an appreciation for the wisdom accumulated through tradition and custom, the recognition that local governing allows the flourishing of pluralism, and the understanding that democratic governing institutions and voluntary community associations are similarly valuable means of collective action.

Even if we produce gritty and resilient students, they may still lack an understanding of what they ought to apply their grit and resilence toward in the public square.

Regardless of which elements a community determines should be part of its civic-character list, it is at least clear that such a list ought to exist. Intellectual and performance character do not answer the same questions as civic character; being curious and hardworking does not guarantee one will possess the habits and beliefs necessary for citizenship. Moreover, intellectual and performance character are an inadequate foundation for civic character. To successfully promote civic character we must lean on elements of moral character. That is, a commitment to liberty, democracy, pluralism, service, and positive law (traits of civic character) is built on citizens' humility, honesty, gratitude, and respect (traits of moral character).

This suggests two broad lessons for the citizens aiming to influence public education. First, we must appreciate that performance character may be a necessary condition for a student's development, but also that it is not sufficient. Performance character, no matter how inspiring its focus on grit and determination, does different work than other forms of character. The difference between performance character and moral, civic, and intellectual character should be the starting point for reform efforts.

Unfortunately, it is not always so. In a 2012 chapter for the American Psychological Association, Marvin W. Berkowitz, a professor of education at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, offers a framework for how schools can influence students' moral psychology. He describes an "anatomy" that includes multiple moral domains as well as "foundational characteristics," like perseverance and courage. Though he does not use the exact same moral/performance language as Shields, he does clearly identify the difference between morality and the personal characteristics that enable one to act morally. The problem he notes is that "schools rarely consider this distinction as they generate lists of values or virtues to guide their character education initiatives."

Fortunately, some have recognized this distinction. For instance, in a short 2003 paper, the Character Education Partnership offers "Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education." The very first principle argues that ethical values form the basis of good character. The second principle describes the thinking, feeling, and acting elements of character. The key takeaway here is that morality is the core of character education; subsequent to that is instruction on our cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. Similarly, "Character Counts," a widely used framework, observes six pillars—trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship—that recognize the role of moral and civic character.

The second lesson is that our policymakers—citizens' representatives—need to engage this issue more fully. Unfortunately, leaders have come up with numerous ways to avoid advocating moral and civic character. Teaching students the value of "grit," "social justice," and

"equity" appear to be common off-ramps. But traditional debates over history content standards often have one side emphasizing dates and names and another emphasizing theories of power and identity—while both sides ignore the role of character and virtue. Similarly, debates over civics often hinge on whether content knowledge or activism is prioritized—with character and virtue both largely ignored.

Another inadequate substitute is "social-emotional learning," which has recently become a popular way to talk about the wide array of schools' non-academic responsibilities. One definition of SEL is "the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions." SEL *can* be pursued with character in mind; for example, The Aspen Institute's major 2019 SEL report, "From a Nation at Risk to a Nation at Hope" considers "character and values" one of three categories of skills and attitudes that describe how learning occurs. But other SEL frameworks leave out character, ethics, and morality entirely, instead focusing on attributes associated with intellectual and performance character.

State leaders should consider how best to formally integrate character education—especially moral and civic character—into policy issues. Civics is a natural place to begin. A 2016 study found that while most states have some kind of assessment for civics, only 15 make demonstrated proficiency on such tests a condition of high school graduation, and only 17 include civics and social studies in their accountability systems. And of course, the extent to which moral or civic character is reflected in these assessments varies.

But there might be movement in the right direction. An important 2003 report titled "The Civic Mission of Schools," produced by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, argued that competent and responsible citizens have four categories of attributes, one of which is the possession of "moral and civic virtues." A follow-up report from 2013, "Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools," concurred, noting that self-government "requires citizens who are informed and thoughtful, participate in their communities, are involved in the political process, and possess moral and civic virtues."

Perhaps influenced by such work, in 2013, a coalition of groups engaged in social studies education released the "College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards," a document designed to inform the upgrading of state content standards and the development of instructional materials. In several places, it highlights the importance of civic virtues (including honesty, mutual respect, cooperation, equality, freedom, liberty, attentiveness to multiple perspectives, and respect for individual rights). It notes that such virtues apply to both the interactions among citizens and the activities of governing institutions. A 2018 study by the Brookings Institution found that, by September 2017, 23 states had used or were planning to use the C3 framework. Similarly, the civics framework for the 2018 administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress includes considerations of "public and private character" under the "civic dispositions" component. Private character includes traits such as "moral responsibility, self-discipline, and respect for individual worth and human dignity." These are deemed "essential to the well-being of the American nation, society, and constitutional democracy."

There are also ways apart from standards and assessments that policymakers can advance education related to moral and civic character. The Jubilee Center for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham has produced a guide called "The Framework for Character Education in Schools." Though aimed at practitioners, it can be read to imply a set of policy recommendations. For example, teacher education standards and educator certification and licensing regulations reflect what we believe teachers ought to know and be able to do; strong families support the development of character; student nutrition and health are prerequisites for the acquisition of character; direct instruction and strong curricula related to ethics can enable students to learn character; courses enabling students to grapple with moral challenges facilitate character development; and character can be taught through role modeling and mentorship. The point is that as they contemplate rules related to teacher training, course development, discipline, graduation requirements, and much more, our education policy leaders have ample opportunity to prioritize character.

Jubilee's framework also articulates why those in positions of governing authority—irrespective of political or ideological leanings—ought to engage in these matters. "The ultimate aim of character education is not only to make individuals better persons but to create the social and institutional conditions within which all human beings can flourish." That is, those who believe that statecraft is soulcraft will recognize the valuable role public institutions can and should play in developing the character of students. But even those who have a more modest vision for the state should appreciate that our governing and civil-society institutions need to be led and populated by individuals of character so that those institutions can foster a social environment such that free citizens can thrive. ■

Family Matters

The formative power of our first institution

by **YUVAL LEVIN**

The idea that the family is an institution at all is hard to deny and yet difficult to comprehend. This is in part because the family occupies a distinct space between two meanings of the term "institution." It is not an organization exactly, but neither is it quite a practice or a set of rules or norms. In a sense, the family is a collection of several institutions understood in this latter way—like the institution of marriage and the institution of parenthood. The family arranges these institutions into a coherent and durable structure that is almost a formal organization. It resists easy categorization because it is primeval. The family has a legal existence, but it is decidedly pre-legal. It has a political significance, but it is pre-political too. It is pre-everything.

This is sometimes a real problem for our liberal society, because it casts doubt upon the idea that our natural state is some kind of libertarian individualism. Some important political theorists in our liberal tradition have tried to ground their ideal of liberty in a pre-social condition, or a state of nature, that is populated by wholly independent individuals. Yet these kinds of thought experiments, for all their value, are plainly implausible as descriptions of the human condition. No human being has ever lived a life in circumstances of utter individualism, without some degree of community—which often is at first an extended family. Our social order flows out of the basic conditions of how we come into the world, move through it, and depart it, and so it unavoidably flows outward from the family. Family is the most primordial, and therefore the most foundational, of the institutions that form a society.

It is also therefore, more than anything else in our experience, a *form* of our common life—a structure for doing essential things together. That is what makes it our most basic institution. But how is the form of the family related to its function? It is this seemingly straightforward question that has put the family at the center of our contemporary culture wars.

We know that people need thriving families to flourish. No one in any corner of our politics would really deny that now. But what are the needs that the family meets? Some are surely practical necessities: families care for their members' material needs. They feed and house children (and at times the elderly or others) who would be unable to feed and house themselves. They enable the sharing of resources and responsibilities, so that everyone has someone whom they trust, and whom the larger society trusts, to care for them if they are unable to care for themselves. The family is also a vessel for our deepest loves: it is a formal acknowledgement of a set of human relationships.

These two facets of what the family does—serving as a means of provision and a means of recognition—are increasingly central to our contemporary understanding of the family's function. But they leave out the family's formative purpose, the ways in which it shapes our soul and molds our character. When we put aside the formative functions of the family, we might be able to persuade ourselves that thriving families are important only for economic and symbolic reasons—that so long as our material needs are met and our relationships are recognized, the

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family has served its core purposes. Where families prove unable to meet their members' material needs, other forms of assistance, both public and private, can fill in the gap, and the family can just stand as an acknowledgement of mutual love among its members.

This would suggest that the form of the family, and therefore its formative potential, may not be essential to its function. But, of all our institutions, this is surely nowhere less true than in the family. The family is our first and most important institution, not only from the perspective of the history of humanity, but also (and more simply) in the life of every individual. It is where we enter the world, literally where we alight when we depart the womb. It gives us our first impression of the world, and our first understanding of what it is all about. It then sees us through some of our most vulnerable years of life, taking us by the hand as we progress from the formless ignorance of the newborn through the formative innocence of early childhood to the fearful insecurities of juvenile transformations and hopefully, eventually, to a formed and mature adjusted posture in society. This is a process of socialization, and therefore fundamentally of formation. But it is not a formation that happens through instruction so much as through example and habituation. The family forms us by imprinting upon us and giving us models to emulate and patterns to adopt.

The family does all this by giving each of its members a role, a set of relations to others, a body of responsibilities, and a network of privileges. Each of these, in its own way, is given more than earned and is obligatory more than chosen. Although the core human relationship at the heart of most families—the marital relationship—is one we enter into by choice, once we have entered it that relationship constrains the choices we may make. The other core familial bond—the parent-child relationship—often is not optional to begin with, and surely must not be treated as optional after that. It imposes heavy obligations on everyone involved, and yet it plays a crucial role in forming us to be capable of freedom and choice.

In this sense, the institution of the family helps us see that institutions in general take shape around our needs and, if they are well shaped, can help turn those needs into capacities. They literally make virtues of necessities, and forge our weaknesses and vulnerabilities into strengths and capabilities. They are formative because they act on us directly, and they offer us a kind of character formation for which there is no substitute. There is no avoiding the need for moral formation through such direct habituation in the forms of life.

The family is our first and most important institution, not only from the perspective of the history of humanity, but also in the life of every individual.

In the family, this often means habituation in the roles reserved for spouses, parents, children, grandparents, and other supportive relatives. That means the form and structure of the family is essential to its ability to serve a formative purpose.

This is not necessarily good news, because family structure is not an easy thing to build and sustain. In fact, for the past few generations, our society has had enormous trouble doing both. We are plainly living through a collapse of family forms. About four in ten American children are now born into a family with only one parent—generally a single mother working hard to provide the resources, the structure, and the love and support her children need. Meanwhile, marriage rates have fallen, and married couples have tended to have fewer children over time. This has meant that family life in America has fallen away from the traditional pattern of family structure. That has happened for the most part without the emergence of a new or different durable institutional structure for the family, so it has happened as a deformation and has therefore been a source of disorder and disadvantage in the lives of many millions of Americans.

The model of the traditional family—a mother, a father, children, and an extended family around them—has always been a general norm more than a universal reality. It is important not because everyone has lived this way, but because even those who live otherwise (as, one way or another, a great many families always have) could implicitly resort to this model of the family as a baseline to understand what they possess and what they lack. Formation often involves patterning ourselves after what we seek to resemble, and the ideal of family built around parenthood rooted in a stable marriage has always served that role, even for many people whose lives are not so traditional.

Photo of Norman Rockwell's "Breaking Home Ties" *Joe Raedle / Getty Images*

It is precisely on this front that family life in America has been affected by the penetration of culture-war politics into every institutional crevice in our society. The family, because it unavoidably constrains personal choice and expressive individualism, has been turned into yet another arena for controversy in our multifront political and cultural struggle. The particular shape of the debates we have had—whatever one thinks about same-sex marriage, the rise of cohabitation, single parenthood, or any of the other family-formation controversies of recent decades—has often caused us to perceive an emphasis on the forms of families as an effort to deny recognition and legitimacy to some individuals. This has meant that the popular culture has recoiled from the importance of form in our understanding of family, so that we increasingly come to define family formlessly, or want to allow it to take any form that individuals choose.

This necessarily requires us also to attenuate our sense of the function of the family, or of its purpose. The family as an institution has gradually come to be understood less in terms of its form (and therefore its potential to serve as a formative influence on individuals) and more in terms of its chosen-ness (and therefore its potential to serve as a mode of expression and recognition for individual identities, preferences, and priorities). Thus, to a degree the family, too, becomes a kind of platform, a way of being recognized.

This cultural tendency has plainly been driven by a passion for inclusion, and has surely advanced that vital moral cause. It is far from nefarious, even where it has been detrimental, and it has by no means always been detrimental. But both by fanning intense controversy around marriage and family and by altering our expectations of both, this tendency has made it harder for us to understand the family as a formative institution and to approach our roles in our own families accordingly. Among other things, we have gradually come to treat the intense and nearly universal desire for family life more as a longing for recognition than as a hunger for order and structure, and that, too, has distorted our understanding of what our society and its members want and need.

In this respect, the winds of social change buffeting family life have resembled those that have affected many other institutions. Because the family is such a foundational institution, however, altered expectations of it must function as both causes and effects of the societal transformations we have been tracing. A diminished sense of the family as a formative and authoritative institution leaves us less prepared to approach other institutions with a disposition to be formed by them. And the loss of institutional habits up and down our social life—from government to the professions, the academy, the media, and more—leaves us more resistant to the sometimes burdensome demands of family life.

We have gradually come to treat the nearly universal desire for family life more as a longing for recognition than as a hunger for order and structure.

We face a crisis of family formation—evident especially in rates of single parenthood—but we have increasingly responded to that crisis by downplaying the significance of the family's form. This is a way of avoiding the problem rather than addressing it. And it is deeply connected to our larger escape from institutions.

The family, perhaps more than any institution, forms us by constraining us—by moving us to ask, "As a parent, as a spouse, is this what I should be doing?" That dutiful question, which compels us to see ourselves as more than individuals performing on a stage, is the practical manifestation of the formative power of institutional authority. Its waning is a sign of serious trouble. ■

Whole Life

Could development incentives save struggling families?

by **JACK H. BURKE**

Raising a family has always been challenging, but contemporary family life in America suffers from structural problems that previous generations never faced. These problems are, largely but not entirely, the result of social and economic changes that have occurred over the last 100-150 years. As the United States has ceased to be an agriculturally based society, children have lost their economic status as a "production good." Even on modern farms, technology has changed the relationship children once had with farm labor. The impact of this social and economic change has been profound. Once a reliable source of income for their family—thanks to their role in farm work and other occupations of the pre-information-age economy—children today, considered in cold, economic terms, only offer substantial "returns," generally speaking, after reaching maturity, and completing years of higher education. Today's growing families, in short, face fundamental hurdles on account of 21st-century life—hurdles that once were either negligible or nonexistent. "The stakes may be higher for new parents than in previous generations," as *USA Today* reported in February 2018, "thanks to a combination of changing demographics and economic pressures."

Sounding a similar note for last year's May/June issue of *The American Conservative*, Charles Fain Lehman wrote an article titled "Reversing the Baby Bust," in which he looked at some of the more prominent challenges besetting the modern American family. Among other topics, he cited and discussed the above economic and social trend. But Mr. Lehman and the writers of *USA Today* are only two among many voices now putting focus on this problem. Proposed solutions to the modern West's family crisis have been offered by American political leaders like Marco Rubio, Ann Wagner, and Ivanka Trump, and enacted by countries like Poland and Hungary. Supporting healthy and well-adjusted family units is becoming a renewed focus of policymakers both at home and internationally.

While social changes are partially to blame, many of the wounds that modern families bear are inflicted by bad policy. On account of the U.S. tax code, marriage itself has become an economic liability for working-class people. As Institute for Family Studies research fellow Lyman Stone described in his testimony to the U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee on September 10 of last year, the implied "policy stance of the tax code, of our welfare programs, of almost everything the government does" is that "working-class people should not get married, but middle-class and wealthy people should." In fact, for those enrolled in the IRS's Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) program, simply getting married can reduce one's tax benefit by several thousand dollars. This "marriage penalty," as Stone phrases it, is drastic enough to eliminate 15%—or even 25%—of a family's income. The practical effect of this is to discourage marriage among the very demographic that, arguably, most depends on family stability for its very survival.

The American tax code is so out of whack that merely getting married can vaporize one quarter of a household's income. Although marriage as

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Ivanka Trump, Sen. Marco Rubio, and Sen. Mike Lee discuss the child tax credit at the Capitol. *Alex Wong / Getty Images*

an institution might not be quite as dilapidated as some think—the notion that "50% of all marriages end in divorce" being an example of a popular misconception, as Renée Peltz Dennison discussed in *Psychology Today* in 2017— it is still "no mystery," as Stone says, "why working-class Americans are getting married less." "Today's American families face three intersecting challenges," Lehman wrote in his *American Conservative* article. "The first is exorbitant child-rearing costs…The second is a child poverty rate, which, while down in recent years, remains well above the OECD norm. The third is the cratering fertility rate." Modern times have created a "perfect storm" wherein these three stressors have simultaneously ganged up against the American family.

No longer useful for work and—thanks to Social Security—no longer needed to care for elderly parents, children in the 21st century have become, as Nobel Prize winning economist Gary S. Becker put it in a 1960 paper, a "consumption good." Children today, in other words, benefit their parents mostly in terms of the "psychic income or satisfaction" they provide.

In today's world, whatever joy children may otherwise bring, their benefit is not, generally speaking, measured by the dividends they bring to the bank. At least not until after their academic or trade-school education is finished, at which point, of course, they are no longer children.

Kids, to summarize, just don't pay like they used to.

What kind of policy, then, would incentivize healthy family life, placing normality within reach for struggling Americans? To begin with, before any incentive is enacted, removing the *disincentive* by repairing our broken tax code would be a necessary first step. But, once that is accomplished, we have several promising examples to guide our steps.

In light of the falling birth rate affecting Western countries today, Poland and Hungary have, over the last several years, adopted a portfolio of family-supporting laws meant to better the lives of their citizens. Poland's ruling Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, or "PiS" in Polish) first came to power in 2015, and was recently reelected, based largely on the popularity of its "Family 500+" program, which provides a monthly allowance of 500 złoty (roughly $125 USD) for each child a Polish family has. Originally only provided for additional children, the 500 złoty benefit is now provided beginning with a family's first-born.

The policy has been great, if nothing else, for Poland's international children and family-spending rankings. As Anna Louise Sussman explained in her article "The Poland Model—Promoting 'Family Values' With Cash Handouts," published in *The Atlantic* in October 2019: "Since the early 1990s, Eastern and Central European countries have lagged behind Western European countries in spending on children and families as a share of GDP, but the Family 500+ program puts Poland on par with Germany and Norway." Of course, the rating Sussman describes is irrelevant if it does not correspond to an actual improvement in family life or another variable. So what, exactly, does this policy accomplish on the ground?

One point in favor of the program lies simply in its great popularity. "For progressives and other PiS opponents," Sussman says, "these programs' popularity leave them with little room to maneuver." PiS, in other words, has spectacularly reclaimed the family benefit territory that was historically the domain of the Left. While some have criticized Poland's family programs for their supposed "fiscal irresponsibility," even people who describe themselves as opponents of PiS admit the attraction of the party's family policy. Anna Krawczak, a researcher at the University of Warsaw who also works as an "activist on behalf of fertility patients," says that while she "would never consider voting for PiS," she nonetheless admits that the party's policies go "a long way" in helping her own family. In fact, she uses the Family 500+ benefits to pay for her foster children's therapy.

Consider, also, the example of Barbara Nowacka. Ms. Nowacka, who operated the social policy campaign for a Polish left-wing coalition in 2015, admits in Sussman's article that "this 500+ satisfies people," and that "everyone believes that it is better to have money than trust the state." The Polish progressives' drive for higher investment in public childcare, schools, and hospitals loses its luster, it seems, when placed next to the PiS plan of simply rerouting tax money directly into the pockets of growing families. The Polish citizenry, apparently, feel more comfortable relying on what amounts to a tax rebate delivered under the header of the 500+ plan, than trusting the state—hardly surprising for a country that lived under communism for much of the 20th century.

The Hungarian government has also introduced policies similar to Poland's new family programs. In 2011, the Hungarian birth rate dropped to only 1.23 births per woman, and the government decided to take action to reverse the concerning trend. In light of this, since 2015 Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party has "implemented progressively more generous family benefits such as tax breaks," and has also introduced "interest-free housing loans for young couples, and government support for buying seven-seat cars."

While researcher Anna Krawczak would "never consider voting" for Poland's Law and Justice Party, she admits their policies go "a long way" in helping her own family.

The topic, however, is more complicated than these examples might imply. While Family 500+ was mainly intended to increase Poland's unsettlingly low fertility rate—1.29 births per woman as of 2019—it has thus far, in the words of Sussman, actually "proved more effective at reducing poverty and spurring consumer spending." As Reuters reported this October, the recent PiS victory strengthened the Polish market, and "analysts said [that] PiS's win signaled a continuation of government policies." If nothing else, however, this should help convince skeptics that there is a near- to mid-term economic benefit to the sort of family policies PiS has introduced, and that time should be allowed to tell, in a more thorough, comprehensive way, how these policies will help Polish families in their day-to-day life struggles. Even with the anecdotal evidence aside, after all, the economy is still getting a boost from the policy and the party supporting it.

In Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo's award-winning 2011 book *Poor Economics*, the authors argued: "We…have to recognize that in some cases, the conditions for a market to emerge on its own are simply not there….It often ends up being cheaper, per person served, to distribute a service for free than to try to extract a nominal fee." Banerjee and Duflo made this statement with respect to the main subject of their book—how to understand the economic conditions in poor nations and encourage economic development. By no means dismissive of the free market (the authors in fact dedicate much of their book to the impact of microcredit and small businesses in the developing world) they nonetheless reach the conclusion that, where "the conditions for a market to emerge on its own are simply not there," it is actually more

cost effective to distribute essential, life-improving goods and services that will improve the entire community and thereby, indirectly, the market itself. The market, after all, needs people in order to exist.

One example the authors use to demonstrate their argument is the child vaccination incentive program they themselves tested in Udaipur, India, and which they had previously discussed in a 2010 article in the *British Medical Journal*. To encourage more families to vaccinate their children, in 30 test camps two pounds of dried beans were offered per immunization as an incentive. For a completed course of immunizations, a set of stainless steel plates was offered. This incentive program, Banerjee and Duflo report, was a great success. It increased the vaccination rate *sevenfold* in the village where it was tested; after the program was implemented, the vaccination rate stood at 38%, a great improvement. As the authors explain, offering the dehydrated beans and steel plates actually lowered the overall costs involved in the vaccination program; because the nurse was paid for her time, the incentives made her labor more efficient.

What this shows, with respect to the issue of family support programs, is that the idea of incentivizing or subsidizing beneficial actions to decrease overall cost—whether monetary cost or a more difficult-to-measure social cost—is, in principle, a sound one. Those who respect the findings of *Poor Economics*, a book which won the Financial Times/Goldman Sachs Business Book of the Year Award in 2011, but who might otherwise be skeptical of the Polish and Hungarian family policies—or policies such as the one now being encouraged by Ivanka Trump—might find them more palatable to "laissez-faire" tastes if they consider the success of incentivizing constructive behavior. Even if the comparison is conjectural, it is safe to say that—whether the intention is encouraging child immunizations or strengthening the families of our citizens—sometimes people need, if not a "handout," then at least a helping hand in the right direction. This will encourage actions that benefit the people in question, the economy, and the community at large. Recent events only bring this into sharper focus. As Republican senator Josh Hawley said on *Tucker Carlson Tonight* on March 19 regarding the Coronavirus crisis: "Working families need relief and they ought to get it."

At this point, one might certainly field the argument: "Well, what if Social Security itself is part of the problem? Why not work to dismantle Social Security and the rest of the modern welfare system? Could that not help things?" Perhaps it could, but for one, it is probably fair to say that Social Security, and more fundamentally, the structure of political attitudes and programs that surround Social Security—whatever theoretical objections one might have—are not going anywhere anytime soon, if ever. Moreover, the basic shifts in the economy and technology have nothing directly to do with government intervention. That is not to say those objections to Social Security are invalid, far from it. Maybe, one day, there will come an unforeseen time when all these issues can be sorted out by private institutions—when a purist libertarian state is possible. But the social landscape of contemporary society has found us, whether we would have it or not, struggling to meet the needs of our citizens in this area of life. When viewed as a tax rebate, their supposed "incompatibility" with libertarianism or small government "conservatarianism" becomes unclear. Instead of holding out for a politically promised era that might never, and probably will never, come, we have to do what we can with the tools we have right now to help the people in front of us.

What, then, is the ultimate takeaway from this? Have the social policies of our country really been working at odds with the fundamental wellbeing of our citizens for so long?

In America, "We the People" and "One Nation Under God" are the watchwords that point us to our proper destination. If our nation does not serve the human needs of the people that inhabit it, it is failing in a truly fundamental way. If a tax code, social program, or monetary system is not benefiting "We the People," or serving the just cause of God and nation, it is our right, as a certain document says, to "alter or abolish it." The tendency (that shows itself regularly enough) in the economic field to detach the "bottom line" from any damage done to the community merely amounts to a crude, inhumane "ends justify the means" philosophy. Those who wish to support and revitalize the modern West, which ought to be the common goal of everyone involved in public policy today, must remind themselves that a market or society is only truly "free" when it does not enervate the lives and morals of those meant to exercise that freedom. ■

Nevertheless, She Persisted

The story of a pro-life Democrat's presidential run

by **HUNTER DeRENSIS**

The infant would be delivered. The infant would be kept comfortable," said Virginia Governor Ralph Northam, explaining to a radio audience how a Democratic-proposed bill in the state legislature would handle an unsuccessful late-term abortion. "The infant would be resuscitated if that's what the mother and the family desired. And then a discussion would ensue between the physicians and the mother." The discussion would be whether or not the unwanted newborn would be allowed to live.

The Virginia proposal to eliminate restrictions on late-term abortions was tabled due to Republican opposition, but a similar measure had already passed in New York. The governor's blasé description of infanticide was a shock to the conscience of many. The abortion debate had officially reached its biological limit: post-birth.

The Democratic Party wasn't always on this path. When the Supreme Court legalized abortion nationwide in 1973, many Democrats believed *Roe v. Wade* was the wrong decision. The list included the "Lion of the Senate" Edward Kennedy, the good Reverend Jesse Jackson, and even the Democratic Party's presumptive 2020 presidential nominee, Joe Biden.

As these men began to abandon the pro-life cause, one group of women organized a last-ditch protest against their party's embrace of abortion. This band of housewives and homemakers, organized around the 1976 presidential campaign of Ellen McCormack, would introduce the pro-life movement to national politics and contribute to the party realignment on social issues Americans see today.

Their story begins in the late 1960s, following the Vatican II reforms, when the Catholic Church began developing local community organizations to engage more with parishioners. In Merrick, Long Island, a dialogue group was formed under the eye of Father Paul Driscoll.

"Basically it was just a bunch of friends, and a lot of them just went because it was a chance to have adult conversation, because a lot of them…had four plus children. And it just happened to be all women who were going to the dialogue group," explained Stacie Taranto, associate professor of history at Ramapo College and author of *Kitchen-Table Politics: Conservative Women and Family Values in New York*.

"A lot of them said, other than paying attention to [John] Kennedy because he was a 'handsome Catholic man'—that's how a lot of them described him—they're not paying attention to political issues," Taranto told *The American Conservative*. "They are raised to believe that politics is a male pursuit, and this isn't something that concerns them."

Ellen McCormack was a founding member of the dialogue group, and it was here that she and her friends became aware of the movement to legalize abortion. "I went to some meetings and saw some slides," she recalled to *The New York Times*. "I couldn't believe what was happening. Some people called it a 'fetus.' I was convinced it was a human life being taken. It was a baby. It was a terrible thing to do."

The catalyst for action came in the spring of 1970, when their home state, helmed for over a decade by Republican Nelson Rockefeller, passed the most open-ended abortion law in the nation. Rising to the challenge, this group of mothers and housewives formed the New York Right to Life Party to advance a cause neither side was articulating.

"This is an issue they feel very energized by because they don't even see it as a political issue. They see it as an issue of life and death, and morality," Taranto said. "It's

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something that they'll get off the sidelines for. Whereas they don't have a history of organizing."

From 1970 to 1975, now meeting at each other's homes instead of the church, the women nominated candidates for local and state elections to run single-issue pro-life campaigns. Their hope was to fashion together a strong showing at the polls that they could then use to influence legislators.

"It was really fluid which legislators would be persuaded by this swing vote to vote against legal abortion. That was sort of the idea," explained Taranto. "They didn't feel hopeless if they were in a Republican or Democratic district because they were just trying to show legislators that there was an important swing vote."

"The feminists have convinced the politicians they represent all women," McCormack complained at the time. "But I am a woman too."

It is important to remember that at the start of the 1970s, it was the Republican Party that had been leading the movement for abortion access. Their notorieties included Rockefeller, icon of the Eastern establishment and the bête noire of McCormack and company; 1964 presidential nominee and godfather of the conservative movement Barry Goldwater; and even Ronald Reagan, who as California's governor in 1967 signed a measure to liberalize abortion laws.

This was contrary to the historic Democratic Party of Catholic urban voters that Ellen McCormack and her friends descended from. "In the city, families…would hang FDR's picture next to the pope, at a time when the New Deal anti-poverty measures lined perfectly with the Catholic Church's anti-poverty measures," Taranto said.

Ellen grew up in Manhattan, a daughter of the Great Depression. She married her husband Jack in 1949 and using a subsidized loan they moved to the suburbs of Long Island, becoming first-generation homeowners and part of the post-World War II middle class. Ellen never attended college or worked a salaried job. But by 1976, at the age of 49, she was the mother of four children, a grandmother of two, and she wore the description of housewife with maternal pride. Her story was representative of so many other northern Catholic women who would form the backbone of her presidential run.

In 1975, the women of the New York Right to Life Party came to the decision to run one of their own for president, not for any conceivable chance of winning, but to make abortion a defining issue of the campaign and to advocate for a Right to Life amendment to the U.S. Constitution. It was decided that Ellen McCormack would carry the banner. Despite never holding elected office—not even on the school board—McCormack had gained a following in pro-life circles for a weekly editorial column she began writing in 1972. Titled "Who Speaks for the Unborn Child," it was circulated in 40, mostly Catholic, newspapers.

Instead of acting under their third-party organization, it was decided that McCormack would run in the Democratic primaries. It was the party that the women had always inherently identified with, and it was the party they increasingly saw being taken away from them.

The McGovern-Fraser Commission, created in 1969, had heavily reformed the primary process. The power of the urban machines and political bosses had been curtailed in favor of proportional delegate allocation and mass democratic participation. The Democratic Party created a space for women's voices, and at the turn of the decade the only organized women were feminist groups. The face of women in the Democratic Party was quickly becoming Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan, not the Catholic homemaker it once was.

"The feminists have convinced the politicians they represent all women," McCormack complained at the time. "But I am a woman too. I differ with some of their beliefs. I believe in childcare for the poor, but I don't favor childcare for the middle class. I think we are teaching mothers it is more prestigious to work than be home with their children."

"I believe there is no human being too small or too young, or, for that matter, too old or too handicapped or too dependent or too anything else not to count. Our society can—and with our help it will—respect the dignity of every human life," she said.

McCormack filed her paperwork to run for president in the summer of 1975 and made her public announcement in November at the Parker House Hotel in Boston, Massachusetts. This began an uphill struggle for both attention and respect from the media and party functionaries who were not inclined to give her a fair hearing.

"While there was tremendous energy on the pro-life side in 1976, recall the conventional wisdom in the press and among the college and university elite was that the abortion issue was settled," said David O'Steen, who has been the executive director of the National Right to Life Committee since 1984.

Despite being a national presidential campaign based out of New York City, *The New York Times* would write less than two dozen articles about McCormack, and in October 1975, Morton Dean informed Walter Cronkite

Scene from Woman's March in Manhattan, January 2019 *Ira L. Black / Corbis via Getty Images*

on the CBS Evening News that there were no women running for president in 1976. It took two months for the network to issue a correction.

To the consternation of the political establishment, however, the campaign finance laws at the time were advantageously designed for someone like McCormack and the goals of the pro-life movement. Following Watergate in 1974, Congress passed amendments to the Federal Election Campaign Act, which created the Federal Election Commission and introduced matching funds to federal politics. Under this system, the federal government would match the fundraising of individuals for presidential campaigns that met a certain threshold.

To understand these arcane and intricate federal election laws, the women were helped by Gene McMahon, a local Long Island attorney who had been assisting the New York Right to Life Party since its founding. With McMahon's guidance, the women were able to establish their own political action committee and set appropriate fundraising targets.

It was required that McCormack raise at least $5,000 in individual contributions under $250 from at least 20 different states. Tiling among the grassroots, while their candidate participated in speaking engagements to small groups throughout the Northeast, these dedicated wives and mothers began constructing a presidential campaign from their dining room tables.

"They're literally taking out rolodexes, their Christmas card lists. 'Oh I have a relative in California, let's try to get on the ballot there!' That's how it's organized," said Taranto. "It's sort of amazing to see and to hear how it was interwoven in their everyday domestic and maternal lives. But they saw this as sort of an extension of mothering."

By February 1976, Ellen McCormack became the first woman in U.S. history to qualify for federal matching funds or to receive round-the-clock Secret Service protection.

The campaign already knew what they would spend the money on: television commercials. It was the most advanced way to beam the abortion debate directly into people's homes at a time when major networks like ABC, CBS, and NBC—who collectively accounted for 90% of television viewers—were too tepid to draw the controversy. But under the Federal Communication Commission's equal time law, a network was obligated to give political candidates equal opportunity to air advertisements for their campaign, no matter the content.

"Did you know that the heart of an unborn baby begins to be formed at three weeks after conception? Did you know also that a million babies have their hearts stopped each year in a very painful way, by abortion?" narrated McCormack's voice, over the image of a developing fetus, the sound of its heart beating, and then

flatlining, in the background. The candidate herself then appeared, holding a cooing infant in her arms. "I'm Ellen McCormack, a Democratic candidate for president. Help me to keep these hearts beating. Together we can help both the mother and her baby."

In other commercials, McCormack appeared beside Dr. Mildred Jefferson. A surgeon by training, Dr. Jefferson was the first black woman to graduate from Harvard Medical School. She left her practice to serve as the president of the National Right to Life Committee from 1975 to 1978 and was an early endorser of McCormack's campaign.

Dr. Jefferson expressed to the television audience that "We must find candidates of vision and imagination who will know that we must find better means of solving the social problems than getting rid of the people that caused the problem."

Describing an abortion procedure, Dr. Jefferson did not mince words. Showing pictures of a fetus at 11 and 24 weeks after conception, she said, "Tragically, many babies like these lose their lives in a very painful way, through abortion. In one kind of abortion, the child is literally pulled apart. In another kind, salt solution sends the baby into convulsions. Together we can stop abortion."

As David O'Steen told *TAC*, "You cannot accurately and clearly describe what goes on in abortion without it being strong language."

At least 40 million Americans viewed Ellen McCormack's campaign advertisements. Their graphic nature incensed abortion activists, angry both that a pro-life campaign sought to repeal their political victories, and that the campaign was being partially funded by the federal government. The National Organization for Women and the National Abortion Rights Action League sued McCormack's campaign in an unsuccessful attempt to get the money returned.

"Her candidacy points up the weakness of the law," said Congressman Charles Wiggins, a California Republican. Wiggins was already an opponent of the matching-fund statute, claiming that it only empowered "spurious, one-issue candidates" like McCormack.

Responding to the outrage, Congress reformed the law that spring and raised the qualification bar. McCormack lost matching funds in May, after receiving a total of $244,000 from the federal government, duplicating dollar for dollar what she was given by supporters. "The professional politicians are making a great many mistakes," McCormack told Newsweek after the law changed. "I don't think I should be disqualified just because I haven't been making those mistakes for the past twenty years."

Throughout the primary, McCormack fought against the stigma that comes with single-issue campaigns. "I am a serious candidate," she said. "I stand for the rights of the unborn. I don't see why that one issue can be overlooked."

While the pro-life cause was her motivation and dominant focus, McCormack did express opinions on other matters. These included the death penalty ("It is the same kind of negative philosophy that gave us abortion"), busing ("While I favor [racial] integration, I do not approve of court-ordered forced busing"), energy policy ("At the present time I believe that nuclear energy will provide the necessary needs of our country for centuries to come"), and even foreign policy ("We have failed to use our resources for peace, but rather have let [Henry] Kissinger bargain them away, with no peace, no concessions, in return").

Having no previous experience in government and running against the consensus on abortion held by American elites, Ellen McCormack's campaign struck a resolutely populist note. "Every American has the right to become involved in politics," she said. "The professional politician is out of touch with the issues that affect and concern the people."

"Politics is too important to be left to the politicians," she exhorted, mentioning elsewhere that "people, not judges" should be "making the basic value judgements about the future of our country."

Her message found an audience. McCormack's kitchen-table campaign had worked to get her name on the ballot in 22 states, the most of any female candidate up to that time. Her best performances were garnering 9.4% of the vote in Vermont, 7.8% in South Dakota, and 6% in New Jersey. By the end of the primary, she had earned over 267,000 votes, with 22 delegates to the national convention from five states. McCormack outperformed three U.S. senators and two governors in the race for the nomination.

"She was a candidate who had no national name recognition, no political experience, no business experience, no military experience. So for someone whose only name recognition came within a limited circle of pro-life activists in New York state, for her to actually run nationally (not in every state, but in a number of states), and in some of those states receive votes in the high single digits, that's not bad," commented Daniel K. Williams, professor of history at the University of West Georgia, and author of *Defenders of the Unborn: The Pro-Life Movement before Roe v. Wade*.

One vignette well represents the pro-life tendencies that still existed in the Democratic Party, and that Ellen McCormack was able to tap into. Her campaign put special focus on the Massachusetts primary, which was only the fifth contest that year, immediately following

New Hampshire. Another candidate who placed his bets on a good showing in the Bay State was Indiana Senator Birch Bayh. Widely considered to be a major player for the nomination, Bayh had, as a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, been instrumental in ensuring proposals for the Human Life Amendment never came up for a floor vote.

"That really hurt him among a lot of voters in Massachusetts who were pro-life. Massachusetts had a substantial number of pro-life Catholics in the 1970s. So Ellen McCormack was getting almost no national news coverage, but she managed to come within eight votes of Birch Bayh's total in Boston," Williams told *TAC*. "It showed, at the time, that at least among Democratic voters, position on abortion really mattered and the winning position was not necessarily the pro-choice position."

McCormack capped off her presidential campaign by giving the keynote speech at a rally of 10,000 pro-life demonstrators in New York City, the day before the start of the Democratic National Convention. She proceeded to lead this display of political strength in a two-mile march to Madison Square Garden, all the while carrying a sign that read "Jimmy Carter to be born again one must first be born. Stop Abortion."

At the convention, McCormack had her name placed into nomination but she was unable to turn the tide on abortion within her party. After a contentious debate—many Jimmy Carter delegates were pro-life as well—the Democratic convention adopted a party platform that "recognized the religious and ethical nature of the concerns which many Americans have on the subject of abortion," but felt that it was "undesirable to attempt to amend the United States Constitution to overturn the Supreme Court decision in this area." The wording was a milquetoast defense of the status quo, which meant *Roe v. Wade* would stand as law.

"In response, the Republican National Convention, which met later that summer, adopted a much stronger statement of opposition to *Roe*, endorsing a constitutional amendment to change the Supreme Court decision and, as they put it, 'restore protection of human life'," explained Williams.

This served two purposes. First, the statement would be an outreach to McCormack's voting bloc, who supported a national ban on abortion. But it was also vague enough for liberal Republicans to interpret it the way President Gerald Ford preferred: that abortion should be decided on a state-by-state basis.

While both parties worked to keep their position exceptionally moderate—polling at the time showed both Republican and Democratic voters equally split on support for a pro-life amendment—it was the first divergence that would pave the way for the culture wars yet to come.

That year, Ellen McCormack refused to endorse either Carter or Ford, equally unimpressed with their wishy-washy positioning on abortion. Her one high-profile endorsement went to New York's Republican Senator James Buckley, brother of Bill, who had repeatedly introduced the Human Life Amendment in Congress. Buckley was defeated for reelection by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who later on in his public career would have his own internal struggle with his party's extremism on abortion.

The New York Right to Life Party continued to field candidates for the rest of the decade—in 1978 their gubernatorial nominee outpolled the quintessential Liberal Party of New York—but by 1980 the energy was gone. "At that point, a lot of them kind of got burnt out from it. They didn't want to be politicians," explained Taranto. "They just wanted to make sure there was a political party that would strongly come out against legal abortion."

By the time of the Reagan Revolution, the Republican Party had become the vehicle of pro-life activists and social conservatism. While many of her supporters shifted to become part of the "Moral Majority," McCormack herself declined. She received pestering phone calls throughout the 1980 election, both from Reagan's northeast coordinator Roger Stone and campaign manager William J. Casey, begging for an endorsement. She even received a call from the Gipper himself just prior to the general election. But no matter the sincerity of the plea or the earnestness of the assurance, she would never forgive Reagan for signing California's abortion reform law in 1967.

McCormack herself appeared on the ballot in 1980 as the presidential nominee of the New York Right to Life Party. It was an empty display, however, with none of the vim and vigor seen in 1976. She received 32,000 votes, or .04 percent.

In the end, the efforts of those mothers from Merrick, Long Island did not move the needle on public opinion regarding abortion—little has in the past 50 years. But what Ellen McCormack's presidential bid did do was animate pro-life sentiment across the country. She made abortion a lightning-rod issue on the campaign trail, demonstrating the untapped potential of social issues in politics. The effort also symbolized a closing chapter in the history of the Democratic Party, whose mantle today is represented by men like Ralph Northam, not women like Ellen McCormack.

Looking back at her campaign, which broke so many barriers for women in politics in service of the rights of the unborn, McCormack expressed, "A traditional woman had to do something untraditional." And she did. ■

Military-Industrial Pandemic

When special interests trump national interests

by **MICHAEL HORTON**

Before coronavirus came to dominate the headlines, one of the most important stories of the year was the signing of an agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban. The deal signed in Doha on February 29 is a first step toward ending the U.S.'s longest war. After nearly two decades, thousands of lost lives on all sides, and an estimated $1.5 trillion, the Trump administration is finally acting on knowledge the U.S. government has long possessed: the war in Afghanistan is unwinnable.

The parallels between the war in Afghanistan and the Vietnam War are striking. In the Afghanistan Papers that were acquired by the *Washington Post*, the senselessness of the war is laid bare by U.S. government officials. The papers are reminiscent of the Vietnam-era Pentagon Papers and show that for years, the U.S. government has known that the war in Afghanistan is a costly and deadly exercise in futility. Afghanistan's terrain, tribal politics, and culture have long thwarted invaders. This is something that the British and the Soviets, to the delight of U.S. officials in 1979, learned the hard way.

Yet despite clear lessons from the past and what should have been some institutional memory, U.S. policymakers pursued financially and strategically ruinous wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Estimated expenditures on these two wars and the larger open ended "war on terror" now exceed $6.5 trillion. Rather than having made the U.S. more secure, these wars, and the unchecked defense spending that they demand, make the U.S. more vulnerable to a host of internal and external threats.

America's interventionist policies abroad and the cancerous growth of defense budgets, the most recent of which is nearly $800 billion, compromise Washington's ability to grapple with threats like crumbling infrastructure, an educational system that fails to deliver, and true national preparedness for a crisis like the coronavirus. It is useful to think about what even a small portion of the $6.5 trillion spent on failed wars could have done had it been spent on infrastructure, world-class public education, accessible healthcare, and emergency preparedness. If it had been spent intelligently and strategically, it could have been transformative.

Instead, the U.S. public, as has so often been the case, continues to allow the military-industrial complex to exercise undue influence. The companies that make up the vast military-industrial complex in the U.S. spend millions lobbying Congress. These lobbying efforts probably have the highest return of any investment on the planet. In exchange for comparatively paltry campaign donations, members of Congress are persuaded to pass legislation that yields billions in revenue for these companies.

Those who stand up to the calls for increased defense spending are said to be "soft on defense" or even called "unpatriotic" by rival politicians and the platoon of retired colonels and generals who act as paid cheerleaders for defense contractors. In his 1961 Farewell Address, President Eisenhower presciently warned Americans about the power of the military-industrial complex. In the often-quoted speech, Eisenhower argued that "we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted

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influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex." Eisenhower went on to say that a failure to guard against this influence could lead to a "disastrous rise of misplaced power" that could "endanger our liberties or democratic processes."

Americans have ignored Eisenhower's warning, and we are living with the consequences. The insidious influence of the military-industrial complex infects both Congress and much of the U.S. news media. Never was this more apparent than after September 11, when those who questioned the march to war in Afghanistan and Iraq were demeaned or silenced. Real debate about how to best respond to the threat posed by al-Qaeda and, more generally, militant Salafism was quashed. Instead, the U.S. pursued the most expensive and, as time would prove, counterproductive policies imaginable.

Nearly 20 years on, Afghanistan is slowly reverting to Taliban control. The invasion of Iraq spawned the Islamic State and turned the country into an Iranian satellite. Neither of these wars achieved their aims, but they did make hundreds of billions of dollars for defense contractors. Low-cost and effective ways to combat terrorism are rarely considered. Such methods do exist and often consist of little more than empowering local communities via very specific tailored development projects. But such methods do not require hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of drones and Predator-borne missiles. Thus, they receive little attention and even less funding.

Now, as the U.S. winds down its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the "war on terror" is passé. The new threats are the old threats: Russia and China. The pivot away from the war on terror to renewed preparations for combatting China and Russia will be even more profitable for the defense industry because this means increased funding for big-ticket legacy weapons systems. The defense budget just passed by Congress is one of the largest in the country's history and even funds the creation of a sixth military branch, the Space Force. The demands for ever more defense spending ignore the fact that the combined defense budgets of China and Russia equal a little more than a quarter of what the U.S. spends on defense. Nor is there much discussion of the fact that a war between great powers is as unlikely as it is unthinkable due to the threat of mutually assured nuclear annihilation.

In the same speech in which he warned Americans about the rise of the influence and power of the military-industrial complex, Eisenhower argued that the only real check on this would be "an alert and knowledgeable citizenry." One can only hope now that the U.S., and indeed the world, face the threat of a global pandemic, that Americans will begin to question soaring defense budgets and endless wars that contribute little to real security. Real security, as this pandemic will demonstrate, is dependent on internal resiliency. This kind of resiliency is built on sound infrastructure, accessible healthcare, a well-educated and healthy populace, localized supply chains, and responsive and responsible government. The coronavirus pandemic may finally force a rethink of how the U.S. government spends its citizens' money and how willing it is to continue funding and fighting counterproductive wars. ■

Why Can't the VA Get It Together?

Healthcare 'choice' for veterans shouldn't mean bad or worse.

by **KELLEY BEAUCAR VLAHOS**

Gary Pressley wasn't the first veteran to shoot and kill himself in a Veterans Administration hospital parking lot and likely won't be the last. According to the VA, there were 19 such suicides across the country from 2017 to 2018. Pressley's particular cry for help—and what some observers have called a grim form of protest—was a bit unique, however, because it not only raised questions about VA's ability to give veterans timely, quality care, but also cast doubt on the success of recent congressional plans to redirect veterans to private care when necessary.

Pressley's death in Georgia in April 2019 (his was one of three on a VA property in a five-day period) and his mother's subsequent lawsuit against the VA system for negligence, casts light on an ongoing debate over why the VA cannot seem to crawl out of its massive bureaucratic problems. But the 28-year-old Navy veteran didn't just kill himself because he couldn't get an appointment. According to his mother, he began going through pain medication withdrawals after his private doctor stopped taking veterans in February 2019 because the VA owed the practice thousands of dollars in unpaid reimbursements. According to his family, after he was dropped, Pressley tried repeatedly to get an appointment with the VA (he was a patient there before they referred him to the private sector), to no avail.

Family members warned the VA police on April 5 that Pressley was making the two-hour drive from Forsyth to the VA in Dublin, Georgia. There, he made five desperate, reportedly unheeded calls to the main switchboard. He was found slumped over the car's console that evening, at 5 p.m.

His sister "Lisa told the operator exactly where he was located based on his GPS signal," the lawsuit reads. "No one from the VA attempted to locate or assist Gary, who was on the brink of death."

A spokeswoman at the VA headquarters in Washington would not comment directly about Pressley's case.

So, five years after Congress passed the Veterans Choice Program to deal with the influx of over 1.5 million Iraq and Afghanistan veterans coming into the system since 2001 (not to mention the scandals over wait times and poor access to care), it seems that no one is satisfied with how it's turning out. The biggest problem, as highlighted in Pressley's case, is the 2.5 million backlogged reimbursement claims from private providers, representing hundreds of millions of dollars of unpaid bills. To get a sense of how much this is, consider that as of February, New Hampshire alone said its providers were waiting for repayments of $134 million.

'New and Improved'?

Doubts are already circling around the second "new and improved" incarnation of the choice program—the Mission Act—which began in select regions last June and is rolling out fully this year. The new program consolidates the network of doctors and streamlines the rules. Veterans can go to any urgent care without prior authorization (but still need pre-authorization for primary and specialty care). Those with more than 20-day wait times for mental health and primary care at the VA (and 28 days for specialty care) can access a doctor in the private network. Those who are more than 30 miles away from a VA (60 miles for specialty care) are automatically eligible.

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There are already bumps: in November, one of the two third-party private companies administering the new, more consolidated choice program said it would probably need upwards of $75 million more to build out the network to accommodate the increase of patients under the new Mission Act (about 2.1 million eligible vets total). The contracts for three regions in the U.S. were awarded to Optum Public Sector Solutions Inc., in December and are worth $55.6 billion through 2026.

Senators, too, have recently voiced skepticism that the new system can accommodate the strain.

There is, of course, finger-pointing on all sides, raising the age-old question of whether a government-run system tailored to their needs, or the private sector, better serves veterans looking for more efficient and accessible care.

"I voted against the Mission Act," declared Senator Mike Rounds of South Carolina, in an interview with *TAC*. He was only one of five opposing votes last May and one of two Republicans (the other was Senator Bob Corker from Tennessee.) "I thought they were making promises they could not keep; they were offering services that they were not properly funded to do, and in doing so they were taking away the first set of guarantees we promised veterans for years."

He said there were millions of dollars in unpaid private care in his state, "and the VA has not shown how they are going to fix it."

To attempt to comprehend the blame game involved in the epic saga that is VA healthcare reform, we have to tease out the competing interests among veterans, advocates, and politicians.

Defenders of the VA say that "privatization zealots" (particularly among Trump appointees who have been accused of undermining the institution) are pushing veterans into a private healthcare system that is wholly unprepared for the burden. Moreover, they do this at the expense of truly fixing what has been wrong with VA for decades (resources not meeting demand, bureaucratic morass, poor training, and a toxic culture).

Those in favor of more privatization said that the VA has proven unable to clean its own house. Until it is capable of providing the care promised to veterans, those who sacrificed should have choices. Meanwhile, they say, problems in the private system, like the reimbursement backlog, are directly caused by the usual red tape endemic to an over-regulated, flabby, inefficient federal system.

Why can't the VA get it together?

Aside from the rosy view projected by the VA press office and the Trump administration, no one is fully confident in this hybrid system to date. And most agree that the VA is insufficient at a time when millions of new veterans are pumping into the system due to 18 years of endless wars overseas. A generation of older veterans are leaving the rolls, yes, but we know the VA wasn't prepared to take on the myriad mental health and polytraumatic injuries that are emblematic of this post-9/11 cohort—including brain injuries, amputations, and toxic exposures—from the beginning.

Furthermore, the network of VA hospitals built in the 20th century is ill-fitted to today's veteran demographic, which is more rural and concentrated in the southern and western parts of the country. Only 55 percent of veterans are within a 40-minute drive of a medical center, and only 26 percent are within a 40-minute drive of VA specialty care, like oncology and cardiology facilities. Those who are poor and rely on public transit are in even worse shape. Older, low-income vets tend to rely on the VA more.

Combine that with chronic issues and scandals involving hospital administrations hiding unacceptable wait times and accompanying mortality rates, huge backlogs of disability claims, and continued whistleblower retaliation across the country, and you have a system that has been fighting non-stop for the confidence of a nation, not to mention the veteran population, every year, through Democratic and Republican administrations alike.

And yes, the VA budget totals have increased every year since 9/11. The 2020 budget is $221 billion; the White House has proposed $240 million for 2021. In 2001, before the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the budget totaled around $45 billion. But the issue is not how much, but how it is being spent. As one veteran advocate who works for a law firm specializing in disability claims put it, the money gets spread around with no heed to changing demands. There are critical vacancies in the departments and hospitals that need it most, leading to poor training and implementation of constantly changing rules and mandates. Add that to inconsistent congressional oversight and the injection of privatization politics, and you end up with constant fragility.

What veterans say

When contacted by *TAC*, representatives of top veterans' service organizations (VSOs) offered varying opinions of the new and previous choice programs, and of VA performance overall. A common thread: most veterans prefer the VA because their doctors are not only top-notch, but are also trained to appreciate the full scope of veterans' unique injuries and experiences. But if they cannot get timely appointments

within a reasonable distance from home, they want to have the option of seeking out non-VA care.

"We have been very strong advocates of the use of privatized care. But we don't support a full privatization of the VA," said Dan Caldwell, Executive Director of Concerned Veterans of America (CVA), a conservative advocacy group that has been accused by some of pushing full privatization. "That's not what we support," insisted Caldwell. "The VA must be a good choice but not the only choice. We believe in healthcare choice, which requires a community care (private) option, but it also requires a strong VA."

He said CVA was probably the most aggressive VSO in support of the Mission Act, though he concedes there are a "lot of moving parts and a lot of ways the Mission Act could be implemented improperly." The group is in favor of a BRAC-style realignment (included in the Mission Act), which would entail closing or downsizing underused, older facilities in favor of shifting VA resources to where they are needed. Caldwell would also like to see something like the military's Tricare system, where veterans do not need pre-authorizations for every primary and specialty care visit.

"The VA needs to move forward in empowering vets over the bureaucracy," he noted. "Too often you hear that veterans and some veterans' groups unfortunately feel this way—that the interest of veterans is not always aligned with the interests of a 400,000-person bureaucracy."

Much of the problem is also mistrust and a lack of communication, said Tom Porter, spokesman for the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), which today has about 425,000 members. In recent surveys, according to Porter, the group found that only 16 percent of its members have used the community choice program, and only 36 percent have even heard of the Mission Act. In the meantime, high numbers—86 percent—say VA care is average or above, though experiences vary. "As they say, you see one VA, you've seen one."

"We support the Mission Act, but we need to keep a watchful eye on the implementation," Porter said. Members have complained about confusion with authorizations and how the program has worked in the past. Also, the VA has "not been particularly transparent" with VSOs about how things are going. Meanwhile, Porter agrees that funding to the VA is scattershot and not effectively targeted, pointing to unspent funding for mental health/suicide prevention outreach and unequal resources for women-specific healthcare.

Senator Rounds admits he is more cynical about the VA's systemic problems. There is a reason this culture punishes, not rewards, whistleblowers who call out cover-ups and mismanagement: the bureaucracy is designed to protect itself first. "With a bureaucracy as large as the VA I think they see any money going outside to the private sector as money they cannot use for their own operations. I really do see that as part of the problem"—a problem that contributes to huge backlogs in the payment system, confusion, and veterans waiting for authorizations to seek care in the private network.

That is just not true, says Christina Mandreucci, a VA spokesperson, in a recent email exchange with *TAC*. "Many of the older claims you reference are from before the implementation of the Mission Act, and either have to do with unauthorized emergency care claims or community care programs that no longer exist." She also said the VA plans to have those 2.5 million unpaid claims completed by the end of the year.

As for the new program, Mandreucci says it is designed to be more streamlined than the previous incarnation, which required pre-authorization even for urgent care. She notes there were already some 200,000 urgent care visits "completed" since June 6. "The Mission Act has greatly expanded the choices veterans have when it comes to their healthcare," she charged.

The American Legion, too, is cautiously optimistic. "We're in a wait-and-see phase," said Chanin Nuntavong, spokesman for the American Legion and its nearly two million members. Nuntavong is a veteran and has used private care under the new system, as well as the VA, while working in Denver. "It was nice having both available."

However, in their own survey, "our members preferred to use VA care. We support that. I personally use VA—they understand me, they understand my ailments, and how I got them. We believe the VA care is the best care because civilian providers don't understand."

This brings us back to the beginning. VA care may be "the best care"—when it is working. The private sector offers choice to veterans who cannot access that superior care. What can Congress do? If they are honest about reforming the system, they can start by better targeting the resources, listening to regional directors, and demanding straight answers from Washington bureaucrats.

They can also provide a streamlined private alternative that is not encumbered by the VA's notorious red tape and inefficiency. This may perhaps take some of the pressure off the VA while it gets its house in order, and keep veterans like Gary Pressley from killing themselves in the parking lot. ■

Monopoly Brewing

Small breweries are being squeezed by conglomerate power.

by **JEREMY LOTT**

Take a trip down the beer aisle at your local grocery store. It might appear that independent craft beers are booming. The great variety of labels indicates that somehow the little guys have managed to buck the consolidation trends of so many other industries and bring their suds to a mass market.

The beer aisle at my local Safeway in Lynden, Washington, for instance, hosts the usual domestic mainstays (Bud, Budweiser, Miller, Coors, Sam Adams), cheap college beers (Pabst, Milwaukee, Busch), Mexican beers (Corona, Negra Modello, Dos Equis), standard one-off foreign imports (Guinness, Kokanee, Foster's, Stella, Heineken), and enough other smaller brands to induce vertigo.

A local beer-drinking customer who didn't want to stay on the well-trodden path could buy a Pyramid Apricot Ale, a Dogfish Head Sea Quench Ale Session Sour, a Thor's Equinox dark ale, a Silver City Ripe 'N Juicy Double IPA, or a Sufferfest Repeat Kolsch Style Beer with Bee Pollen, to pick a few almost at random from a huge number of choices.

The brands available on my beer scouting trip in early February included those already mentioned as well as Shiner, Founders, New Belgium, Sierra Nevada, Shock Top, Kona, Alaskan, Lagunitas, 10 Barrel, Aslan, Deschutes, Widmer Bros., Ninkasi, Red Hook, Elysian, Fremont, Iron Horse, Kulshan, Pike, Fat Tire, and Mac & Jack's.

That list is far from exhaustive. These labels were slapped on lagers, pilsners, pales, porters, IPAs, ambers, browns, stouts, Belgians, fruity beers, sours, light beers, wheat beers, and near beers.

The number of beers Americans can choose from in 2020 is truly staggering. The transformation of the beer market from the stagnant 1970s to today is often referred to as the craft brewing revolution, for good reason. It has been driven by an explosion in the number of smaller breweries across the country, from several dozen to several thousand. Yet many believe this revolution is under threat.

Threats After Prohibition

The threat this time is, by and large, not coming from without. Jacob Grier is a libertarian-leaning mixologist in Portland, Oregon, and author of the new book *The Rediscovery of Tobacco: Smoking, Vaping, and the Creative Destruction of the Cigarette*. Alcohol prohibition "is a live issue in Indonesia" and some other Muslim-majority countries he told me. Here? Not so much. The American Prohibition Party "does manage to linger on," admitted Grier, but it gets a negligible number of votes.

That doesn't mean there are no calls to prohibit things that we consume. Rather, our taboos have shifted. Yesterday's crusades to ban alcohol and marijuana have largely given way to new calls to ban cigarettes and opioids. Grier warns that some advocacy organizations are trying to build the case against even moderate drinking but, for now, they're sailing against a beery wind.

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The real problem in the American beer market, according to many critics, is coming from within the industry itself. Jeff Spross is a left-leaning economics and business columnist for The Week. He believes that the beer aisle "provides a handy lesson" in "the corrosive influence of monopoly power on American society" if only you look a little closer.

You see, while it "might seem like we're awash in brands and a hefty selection of craft beers," Spross writes, "it turns out a lot of those options are actually owned by the same small selection of beer-making giants."

And while there is much greater variety available to mass market nationwide than the choices we used to have, the distribution system that exists in most states makes the variety I noted in my beer aisle trip the high foam mark nationally. In many states, you won't have nearly so many choices.

Big Beer Gets Bigger

The biggest of the beer giants is generally referred to as AB-InBev, or just InBev for short. It is a true international colossus formed of the merger between Anheuser-Busch and Belgium-based InBev. As of 2017, it owned some 400 beer brands around the world, according to Spross. As of 2020, that number had climbed to "over 500," according to the AB-InBev website, which declines to give a complete list. Its larger brands include Beck's, Budweiser, Corona, Hoegaarden, Leffe, Michelob Ultra, and Modelo.

AB-InBev was born of mergers and buyouts and doesn't see any reason to stop. After the Anheuser-Busch and InBev merger in 2008, it swallowed up fellow beer heavyweight SABMiller in 2016 (though it had to sell MillerCoors off to Canadian firm Molson to satisfy regulators). And it hasn't limited its thirst to larger labels.

In 2019, AB-InBev announced plans to buy the Craft Brew Alliance, a collection of originally smaller breweries, including Kona, Widmer Bros., and Redhook. It already owned about a one third stake in these breweries. So long as regulators don't balk, the remaining two thirds will soon be bought for north of $200 million.

The Craft Brew Alliance deal is far from the first craft brewing acquisition by AB-InBev. Through its Brewers Collective "craft business unit," it also owns and operates well-known brewers Goose Island, 10 Barrel, Elysian, Platform, and many others.

AB-InBev has also acquired stakes inbeer publications. A few of these are beer review sites, which Spross argues is truly insidious. ZX Ventures, a venture capital group owned by AB-InBev, bought stakes in RateBeer and The Beer Necessities. "If a massive brewer can own a stake in a major beer rating site, it could well influence what beers that outfit recommends to customers in the first place," Spross warns. He points out that the fiercely independent craft brewer Dogfish Head was "so upset by this development they asked that their beers be pulled from RateBeer's website."

Capitalist outrage is a funny and flexible thing, however. While Dogfish Head may have balked at the outsized influence of one large beer company in 2017, when Spross wrote the column, it sold out to one of that company's mid-sized competitors only a few years later. Boston Beer Company, which owns Sam Adams, knocked back the smaller craft brewer last year in a $300 million deal. And it wouldn't be too surprising to see AB-InBev buy Boston Beer Company a few years from now.

Alcohol Meets Antitrust

Beer is different from whiskey in the sense that freshness matters. It's generally better to drink it as close to the time and place that it was brewed to get the full effect. But if we set aside any "buy local" preferences for a moment, from the beer drinker's point of view, what does it matter if AB-InBev owns many of the beers that we drink, so long as this doesn't significantly reduce choices, hike prices, or lead to the beer getting skunked?

According to Glenn Reynolds, a law professor at the University of Tennessee Knoxville, the prevailing theory of antitrust law is that monopoly power has to be doing harm to the consumer for the government to act. If all that AB-InBev and its remaining large competitors were doing was buying up existing breweries and allowing them to keep offering beers that their customers want, where is the harm?

One huge problem that small firms face is exit and succession. Many firms can't find a way to adequately compensate the founders, or staff the business after them, that allows those firms to survive in the long term. AB-InBev and company could be doing a service to the customers by making sure the beers keep brewing after today's brewers have moved on.

Chris Krukewitt is a founder of Heliotrope Brewery in Lexington, Virginia. I asked for his thoughts on consolidation in the beer industry. He said that his perspective was shared by pretty much all "beer geeks in the know."

Krukewitt's first observation was that "the big boys are buying craft breweries, claiming that changes will not be made and then about a year later the changes hit." For instance, "Maybe the Vienna Lager from Devils Backbone is no longer actually brewed in Virginia but in a Bid plant in New Jersey, and then Wicked Weed is no longer brewed in North Carolina but in the production capacity vacated in Virginia."

In other words, large buyers are taking advantage of their greater capacity and logistics to chase efficiencies and lower taxation. These sorts of actions are common in many industries and do not, in themselves, lead to consumer harm.

The Fight for Shelf Space

The Heliotrope founder admitted that beer production juggling was a relatively minor complaint. "The real problem," he said, "is the shelf space at retailers." AB-InBev and other large players "push their formerly craft now faux craft beers onto the shelves squeezing out independent brewers."

"To make matters worse," Krukewitt said, "distributors cut back on purchases from independent brewers and do not sign new distribution deals with up-and-coming brewers who are effectively shut out of the retail market."

This constriction is depriving beer drinkers of significant choices unless they want to go to all of the breweries themselves. That would take some time, given the vast expansion of craft breweries.

Austin John is "director of production, sales, and fun" for Apocalypse Ale Works, about 50 miles south of Heliotrope, which brags that it is "the first brewery in Forest, Virginia since Thomas Jefferson brewed in the 1800s." "My life has always been about beer," John said.

Growing up, John's father was a home brewer. After they won a homebrew competition at Baltimore's Clipper City Brewing, they decided to go all in with a family-owned-and-operated brewery in 2013, which specializes in "European styles like Belgian Dubbels, Quads, Doppelstickes, and Scottish ales." At the time, they were Virginia's 43rd brewery. The last time John checked, there were over 250 breweries in his state.

John believes that fellow craft brewer Krukewitt "said it well" and that "the problem he pointed out is the heart of the issue. In the three-tiered distribution system here in Virginia and many other states"—which insists on some distinction between producers or importers, wholesalers, and retailers—"big money controls the retail market."

"There are very few independent decision makers at these retailers, thus ceding control to the local distributor," John explained. That means, "to get on a shelf at a volume retailer requires major effort, capital, and perhaps more importantly, support of your distributors."

And here is where the big money comes in to make things difficult for smaller operators. "Many of these distributors that are supposed to service these independent brands are direct affiliates of AB-InBev, or MillerCoors, effectively creating a duopoly by means of vertical integration," said John. "This is hardly a competitive environment for independent brewers, making significant market growth increasingly difficult."

Laws are different from state to state. Some states rigidly enforce the three-tiered distribution system and the distinction between brewers, wholesalers, and retailers, with the exception of on-premises sales to the public. Virginia is one of the more rigid states. Heliotrope's Krukewitt said that they are barred by law from bringing their suds to supermarkets directly. "We must use a distributor," he said, and "are legally not allowed to own any percentage of a distributor."

Mandating independent ownership of distributors doesn't mean that these distributors will favor smaller firms. Many see themselves as primarily go-betweens between large beer companies and supermarket shelves.

Take Pecht Distributors, which the Anheuser-Busch website will point people to as one of their distributors in Virginia. It was founded and owned by Robert "Bobby" Pecht Jr., who died in 2016. Pecht's obituary boasted of him being a "third-generation Anheuser-Bush beer wholesaler" and concluded "This Bud's for you, Bobby!"

John admitted that there can be "a few benefits" to being distributed by these "shadow puppet warehouses." Even if they are greatly influenced or owned by the larger players of the beer market, "they still want to make money" and thus will take chances on "a bunch of small independents" that might sell.

However, he warns breweries to beware of distributors' promises. For instance, they might say that they have their own brand development team that can do wonders for your product. That team's incentives are going to be stacked much more in favor of pushing bigger brands.

John also thinks that the industry consolidation trend is going to make things harder for small operators to gain any footing. "For so long these macro brands were focused on the center of the marketplace, leaving niches in the market previously filled by independent brewers," he said. "The point of these acquisitions by the macro brands is to close these niches, especially regionally, squeezing independents out of the marketplace."

If regulators won't rein in AB-InBev and other larger beer companies, then what might? The two best candidates right now are looming debt and consumer choice.

Some states, such as Washington, have a set of laxer regulations that intentionally carve out more leeway for microbreweries. According to the Washington State Liquor and Cannabis Board, which regulates all alcohol, microbreweries—which are breweries that brew fewer than 60,000 barrels annually—may have their own warehouses and self-distribute their own beer.

There are larger beer distributors here that microbreweries can use, but they don't have to in order to get their suds to a larger market. This strike a balance that is more favorable to smaller players, and is probably a good model of better beer regulation for other states. Though even in Washington, plenty of industry people and beer geeks complain about the influence of big beer.

Limiting Big Beer

AB-InBev has faced little difficulty so far in its mergers and acquisitions. It was forced to sell off MillerCoors as part of the 2016 SABMiller merger. In 2019, AB-InBev was slapped with a $225 million fine by the European Commission for making it hard to import cheap beer from the Netherlands to Belgium.

Antitrust enforcement in America can vary from administration to administration. It was generally lax under President Obama. I asked professor Reynolds if that is changing under the Trump administration. He replied, "Not yet, though they're making noises," and what we've seen so far in beer mergers is consistent with that.

Antitrust regulators in the Justice Department have asked for more information in the pending acquisition of the Craft Brew Alliance, but have given no larger indication that they will intervene. If American regulators won't rein in AB-InBev and other larger beer companies, then what might? The two best candidates right now are looming debt and consumer choice.

To make the sorts of large purchases that AB-InBev has, it has had to borrow a lot of money. Its debt hovers over $100 billion. The beer giant first announced, then canceled, then offered again an IPO on the Hong Kong stock market for some of its Asian business in 2019. The IPO was expected to raise nearly $10 billion. Because global beer sales have taken a dip, it only raised half of that.

There are a lot of different ways to consume alcohol. AB-InBev wasn't prescient or nimble enough to see the hard seltzer craze coming or to get into it before upstart White Claw got a pretty tight grip on that new market.

Even when global beer sales bubble up a bit higher after we recover from forced social isolation, it is by no means certain that AB-InBev, MillerCoors, the Boston Beer Company, or other large players will get the most business. Some of AB-InBev's brands have had awful luck. Early 2020 saw Corona sales tank. There is some debate about why but the coronavirus global pandemic surely didn't help. Other brands that were hot at one time, such as Goose Island, have seen sales struggle.

When I asked veteran mixologist Grier what had changed in his industry since he started mixing drinks in 2008, he said, "The biggest evolution with spirits and cocktails is the diffusion of quality. It used to be that there were a few places and people making very good drinks, and the small community of dedicated cocktail lovers would really make effort to seek them out. Now both the skills and the appreciation for quality drinks are so much more widespread that you can find them in far more venues."

The same applies to beer. Americans used to have far fewer choices and a limited palate for beer. As the available choices have expanded, so have their tastes. Matthew Merz is producer of

May 7, 1890 political cartoon from *Puck* magazine *Fotosearch / Stringer (Getty Images)*

the Portland-based beer-related television show *Drinking with Daren* and a resident of southern Washington state. He recommended a brew pub, inn, and restaurant called McMenamins that is located in Kalama, Washington. It is not the only one of its kind.

"What makes Brian and Mike McMenamin's establishments so special," Merz said, "is not only that each location is truly unique unto itself, but that each has their own brewing team handcrafting vast arrays of ales as original as the property they're fermenting in. The McMenamins craft brewing experience isn't just limited to the standard line up-of ales Pacific Northwest patrons have become accustomed to at all 24 of their breweries; it includes a selection of extraordinary ales of all styles developed and only available at each of these remarkable sites."

The experience is more than just the beer, though we thought (I brought the wife along) the variety and quality of beer at the Kalama Harbor Lodge was excellent. What has become a chain of brewpubs was founded by brothers Mike and Brian McMenamin in 1908. Part of the McMenamin experience is that most locations refurbish grand old historic locations that had fallen into disrepair. Many local communities are clamoring for a McMenamins and this is the sort of thing that big beer will have a hard time swallowing up.

The craft brewing revolution is poised to get a whole lot bigger, regardless of distribution deals. According to the National Beer Wholesalers Association, "In 1983, there were 49 breweries" in all of the United States. In 2017, that number had jumped to "5,648 reported brewers," and at least a quarter of those have no plans for, or need of, distribution.

At the end of 2017, federal permits had been issued for over 10,000 breweries. More than 1,200 additional permits were issued in 2018. At this point there aren't many states with fewer breweries than the whole country enjoyed in the early 1980s.

The total output of all American breweries is over 200 million barrels a year, and there's more on the way. Craft breweries are popping up at a rate far faster than AB-InBev and other big players can buy them up. Regardless of brand ownership, this great flowering and fermentation is having a real effect on the number and quality of choices that you can make on your next trip to the grocery store. ■

The Pain of Placelessness

A strong sense of place is not something found, but something made.

by **TIMOTHY KLEISER**

I stopped my car in the middle of the street and cried at the sight of what lay before me. Joy usually marked the moment when my tires touched onto Adams Street and my childhood home came into view. Only, this time, I reacted the way I did when, as a boy, I neared my grandma's casket and caught sight of her sunken face—her familiar beauty marred by the sting of strangeness.

Weeks earlier, Hurricane Michael had hacked through my hometown of Sneads, a rural farming community in the Florida panhandle. For miles outside of town, the woods that flanked the roads were once so dense with slash pine and mossy oak that deer crossings were a frequent danger to drivers. Now, the woods are awkwardly exposed as thousands of trees lay snapped in half, their jagged bottoms thrust heavenward like pikes on some ancient battlefield.

As I drove into town, a sea of blue FEMA tarps stretched out before me, covering the homes and businesses that had been pummeled by the Category 4 winds. Though some homes were hit harder than others, none were spared—certainly not my childhood home.

After I regained my composure and pulled into my parent's driveway, the full extent of the damage became clear. The sight of trees littering the yard affected me more than anything else. Countless times, I had conquered the heights of those trees and now all but one of them lay forever conquered by the storm. All throughout the neighborhood, near every bend and hollow I once explored, mounds of debris were cobbled together like funeral pyres for my memories. Like the sight of my grandma in her casket, seeing my hometown in such a foreign condition left me feeling disillusioned and out of place.

The term "place" carries at least three meanings. First, at a shallow level, we can think of place as the *site* where a person or thing can be found. Every physical thing that exists can be found some-*where*. It is "placed" in the sense that it presently occupies a particular, physical location. In the case of my childhood home, its site could be represented in a number of ways, such as its street address or its latitudinal and longitudinal position on a map.

Though sites are individual, they are not isolated—they either overlap or exist within concentric circles of one another. While my childhood home is an individual place, it's situated within a larger place—Sneads—which itself is situated within a yet larger place—Jackson County. In this sense, my childhood home is a place-within-place. It's simultaneously distinct from and united to other places.

Second and more intimately, place has to do with a person's or thing's *setting*—the features that give a place its particular character. Like threads to a tapestry, the historical, cultural, ethnic, social, economic, religious, political, and other features of a place are woven together to give each place a setting that is absolutely and indissolubly unique.

Yet "unique" is not how some would choose to describe the setting of my childhood home. Like dozens of other so-called "drive-by" towns in the Florida panhandle, Sneads is virtually unknown to those outside of Jackson County. Many Florida tourists know it only as an anonymous name on a green sign marked "Exit 15" as they flock down the interstate toward the beach. Were a tourist to take that exit in search of gasoline, he would see cow pastures and crop fields peppered with a few homes before arriving at a small stretch of town that's not immediately distinguishable from similar-sized towns with their farm stands, hardware stores, baseball parks, and churches.

But to me and others, Exit 15 represents home. Pulling into town, I see that it's not just any farm stand, but Buddy's—the place that provided the watermelon for

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Aftermath of Hurricane Michael landfall in Mexico Beach, Florida *Michael S. Williamson / The Washington Post via Getty Images*

my family's afternoons at the lake. It's not just any hardware store, but Beauchamp's—the place where my father taught me the meaning of "Phillips-head" and the value of work. It's not just any baseball park; it's the place where my best friends and I chased girls on the playground and grounders on the ball field, blistering and sweating for years until we mysteriously grew into men. It's not just any church; it's the place where the God of my fathers became my Father too.

To someone like me who has been privileged to live there, Sneads isn't just an anonymous name on a green interstate sign, but a humble, one-syllable description of the unique place that has served as the setting for my life, the soil where the seeds of my experiences and dreams have germinated and grown to make me into who I am today. Though similar towns have similar features, no other place has the precise collection and configuration of features that Sneads has. The features (or lack thereof) that cause tourists to drive by Sneads are the very features that tell me I'm where I belong—I'm home.

The third and deepest, most intimate meaning of place has to do with this *sense* of place—a person's sense of belonging to a particular site and setting. If having a site is like having an address ("I am somewhere") and having a setting is like having a unique address ("I am here"), then having a sense of place is like belonging to that unique address (e.g., "I belong here").

Moreover, the strength of a person's sense of place is directly related to their familiarity with and commitment to that place. A strong sense of place would describe a person who is intimately familiar with and perpetually committed to that place. On the contrary, a person would have a weak sense of place if they were unfamiliar with or uncommitted to that place.

Yet even those who are at home can feel out of place when its features are altered enough to render them unfamiliar. In my case, when Hurricane Michael literally ripped many of Snead's features out of place, I was left *feeling* out of place. I was exactly where I belonged, but my sense of place had dramatically weakened as the familiar gave way to the foreign.

Though Hurricane Michael was a tipping point for me, the reality is that I began to feel out of place in Sneads years earlier. It began when I left home and moved hundreds of miles away to attend an out-of-state university. Each time I returned home, I found that I had forgotten yet another street name, the directions to somewhere, or the name of a cashier at McDaniel's grocery. The longer I was away, the more I seemed to forget and to be forgotten, becoming something like a tourist in my own hometown. Yet I still had my childhood home, my family who lives there, and a trove of memories embedded in the physical features of the town itself—until the hurricane came to challenge my final claims to that place.

In hindsight, I realize that the hurricane affected me so deeply not simply because it damaged my home, but

because that home was the only one I had ever truly known. Since the day I left for college, my life had been too transient for me to develop a strong sense of place anywhere else. University life was stereotypically frenetic and, after graduating, I lived in three different states over the course of three years. So, my sense of no longer belonging in Sneads was exacerbated by my sense of not belonging anywhere. The hurricane left me "placeless," with no place where I could go to feel at home.

My experience is similar to one recounted by Gertrude Stein in her 1937 memoir, *Everybody's Autobiography*. Stein describes returning to her childhood neighborhood in Oakland, California, only to be dismayed by the transformations that had rendered it virtually unrecognizable. She summarizes her thoughts in her infamous epitaph: "there is no *there* there." Because the features that had anchored Stein's memories were eroded, so too was her sense of place—her sense of belonging. She goes on to compare the loss of her home to the loss of her very name. Her moral is clear: to lose one's place is, in a way, to lose oneself.

Too often, placelessness is self-inflicted by our gluttonous taste for mobility. The problem arises—as it did with me—when mobility becomes transience.

It should come as no surprise that our identities as humans are somehow intertwined with the places we inhabit. We are earthy people, enrobed in fragile flesh that's composed of borrowed soil. Before we return our bodies to the ground, we offer thanks to our Maker by cultivating the ground upon which we stand. At least, this was once the standard view of the self. Throughout history, people had always lived in place-centered communities where familiarity with and cultivation of one's place was considered a basic rite of civilization and survival.

Today, however, a growing number of people's lives are characterized by a loss of place-identity and the corresponding pain of placelessness. If feeling out of place describes having a weak sense of place somewhere, then placelessness describes having a weak sense of place everywhere. In other words, a placeless person is one who feels as though there's nowhere she truly belongs.

Placelessness often occurs for reasons that are outside of a person's control. Natural reasons might include the death of loved ones or natural disasters such as hurricanes, wildfires, and extreme droughts that can ravage places, forcing people to find homes elsewhere. Unnatural (i.e., man-made) reasons might include crime, war, genocide, discrimination, economic changes, or a host of other reasons that might erase much of what's familiar about a place.

Yet, too often, placelessness is self-inflicted by our gluttonous taste for mobility. One form, "physical mobility," refers to that quintessentially American notion of leaving one's old place in search of better opportunities someplace new. Because the focus is on physical places, physical mobility can paradoxically cause a person to become more place-oriented when their goal is to plant deep roots in their new place. The problem arises—as it did with me—when such mobility becomes *transience*, a state of perpetual movement that makes it impossible to cultivate a strong sense of place.

Another form of mobility refers to the relentless connectivity that we experience across places through the use of various technologies. In contrast to physical mobility, this is a "virtual mobility" that sees disassociation from one's place as the goal. Virtual mobility offers many benefits, of course, like the ability for a traveler to video chat with family or keep up with news from back home. The danger lies in its abuse: using technologies not to connect with home but to get away from it.

Examples of abuses are as numerous as they are commonplace, such as paying more attention to our phones than our surroundings, habitually preferring headphones to nearby sounds, or following national events to the neglect of local ones. Though we're here at *this* site with *this* setting and *these* people, we prefer not to be. So we use myriad technologies to achieve virtual distance from our physical realities.

According to the French philosopher Paul Virilio, this distance from reality results in "action-at-a-distance." In an interview for *CTheory*, Virilio explains: "Action-at-a-distance is a phenomenon of absolute disorientation. We now have the possibility of seeing at a distance, of hearing at a distance, and of acting at a distance, and this results in a process of de-localization, of the unrooting of the being….Our contemporaries will henceforth need two watches: one to watch the time, the other to watch the place where one actually is."

Virilio's description, written back in 1996, now pales in comparison to the virtual mobility that we experience today. Mere action-at-a-distance has given way to a techno-utopian vision of relationship-at-a-distance, as seen in our dependence on social media. When Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and CEO of Facebook, was honored as *Time* magazine's "Man of the Year 2010," Lev Grossman penned the following words about the company:

> Facebook wants to populate the wilderness, tame the howling mob and turn the lonely, antisocial world of random chance into a friendly world, a

> serendipitous world. You'll be working and living inside a network of people, and you'll never have to be alone again. The Internet, and the whole world, will feel more like a family, or a college dorm, or an office where your co-workers are also your best friends.

Facebook's eschatological vision of relationship-at-a-distance is a microcosmic example of what is promised by today's religion of mobility: intimacy without proximity—a sense of place without a corresponding commitment to that place. We want a place to belong to us without us having to belong to it. The assumption is that our physical settings ultimately hinder us from living the good life, so we must be liberated from the constraints of physical proximity to a place and its people.

Far from liberating us, a loss of physical proximity inevitably leads to a loss of place-identity. When we view ourselves and our happiness as perhaps related to but ultimately separate from the places where we live, the effect is that we treat our places as exchangeable commodities—locales to be consumed as we're passing through them.

Those who live in tourist destinations like the Florida Gulf Coast know that a "passing through" mentality is the hallmark of a tourist. As litter-strewn beaches and other messes show, the goal of many tourists is to get what they can while they can. Locals tolerate this because of the benefits that tourism brings to local economies, but no local wants a tourist for a neighbor. Likewise, when our lust for mobility causes us to adopt a "passing through" mentality, we not only tend to treat places like commodities, but we risk being treated as commodities in return: exchangeable consumers who are valued for what can be extracted from us.

In this cycle of commodification, we pass through places—apartments, schools, workplaces, coffee shops—without fully being there. Then, having gotten what we wanted, we leave these places with few people noticing—or caring—that we're no longer there. By living as though we don't belong to a place, we make it impossible for a place to belong to us in return and we inevitably suffer the pain of placelessness.

Stopping the cycle of commodification requires that we see our places with new eyes—not as consumers but as cultivators of place. For a cultivator, place has less to do with external features—though still important—and more to do with the internal relationship between a place and its people. This is a relationship born out of familiarity, nurtured by commitment, and resulting in a life of mutual belonging that says, "I am part of my place and my place is part of me."

As Wilfred McClay puts it in *Why Place Matters*, "'place' is not just a physical quality obtained by mechanical means. You can spell out every one of the objective and structural aspects of place, and never get to the heart of the matter. It is at bottom a quality of spirit, existing more in the eyes and hearts of the beholders than in the permanence of glass and stone and asphalt."

Though I once saw Sneads with this quality of spirit, it's no longer possible for me because I don't live there. As the farmer-poet Wendell Berry writes, "a house for sale is not a home." By choosing to sell my hometown for some "better" place, I eventually began to see it through a tourist's eyes, thinking of Sneads less as my place of mutual belonging and more as the sum of its physical qualities. So, when Hurricane Michael made landfall and tore apart the town's glass and stone and asphalt, it was able to tear apart my sense of place as well. For me, there was no longer any "*there* there."

But for the people of Sneads, something paradoxical happened: Sneads became *more* there. Because Sneads is primarily a quality of spirit for them, the hurricane was unable to touch their sense of place. Rather than causing them to flee, the hurricane stirred them up to care for Sneads and each other in unprecedented ways.

The people of Sneads are cultivators who know in their bones what G.K. Chesterton writes in *Orthodoxy*: "the world is not a lodging-house at Brighton, which we are to leave because it is miserable. It is the fortress of our family, with the flag flying on the turret, and the more miserable it is the less we should leave it. The point is not that this world is too sad to love or too glad not to love; the point is that when you do love a thing, its gladness is a reason for loving it, and its sadness a reason for loving it more."

For communities throughout the Florida panhandle, their suffering caused by the hurricane will continue in the form of economic decline as tourists are repelled by the sad physical conditions of these towns. For these tourists, there is no longer any *there* there because they were never truly there—they were only ever passing through.

But the people who live in these communities are not just passing through. The sad physical conditions compel them to love their towns more. They are cultivators who belong to their places and whose places belong to them in return. And they'll weather yet more hurricanes, wearing their places on their bodies until their bodies are buried there.

Since leaving Sneads, I haven't found another place like it. But I've learned that a strong sense of place is not something found but something made. It's made by familiarity and commitment, by seeing and loving one's place the way that the people of Sneads do. One day, if I belong to a place long enough, perhaps that place will belong to me too. ■

Home Plate

BILL KAUFFMAN

After Midnight

I'll give the coronavirus this: it got me out of going to Buffalo to see the touring company of *Hello, Dolly.*

Well, dark days call for silver linings, don't they?

So when Governor Andrew Cuomo, obviously relishing the near-dictatorial powers he has assumed with nary a peep of protest, ordered the closing of bars, restaurants, theaters, and gyms, and proscribed gatherings of greater than 50 people—or was it 10?; I have trouble keeping up with the edicts—I revisited one of the stranger literary artifacts of our haunted region: the book-length blank-verse poem *At Midnight on the 31st of March* by Josephine Young Case.

Published in 1938, during what eventually might be called the First Great Depression, the book is about a little Upstate New York village, Saugersville, which at the stroke of midnight on the last day of March is suddenly, mysteriously, and seemingly irrevocably cut off from the rest of the world. Its two dozen homes, two churches, school, garage, mill, general store, and grange go dark. (Josephine's father, Owen Young, was president of General Electric, and she takes great delight in turning out the lights in what I assume was a winking nod dadwards.)

Electric power is gone. The phones are dead. The roads leading out of town have disappeared. Search parties venturing beyond the settlement find only "the endless woods, the silent hills...and nowhere any house or any sign of man, there now or ever."

There is "only Saugersville in all the world." It's an autarkist's dream.

Recovering from the initial shock, the good folk of Saugersville take stock. They adapt. They relearn the old ways. Dairymen milk the cows by kerosene light instead of Alec-Tricity. Horses replace farm machinery. Thirsty for beer, they grow hops. Even scoffers head to church.

All is not sunshine and homey bliss. By the following winter influenza cuts through the village; lacking doctors and access to modern medicine, three residents die before "the plague diminished."

There is a *Spoon River Anthology* quality to the poem, with its sensitively incised portraits of Saugersvillians reacting to their village's isolation. Some find satisfaction in communal self-sufficiency, a few rue being stranded in hicksville, and the common lot just make do.

It's look homeward or die, physically and spiritually. "Here is all," resolves the resourceful young May Warder. There is no other place, no better place. I am reminded of a scene in Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* in which steelworkers Nick (Christopher Walken) and Mike (Robert DeNiro) drunkenly exchange confidences after their friend's wedding on the weekend before they are to be shipped to Vietnam. Mike asks Nick if he thinks they will ever return. Nick says, "You know something? The whole thing. It's right here. I love this f---ing place."

Perhaps I ought not advert to a Hollywood movie, even one as good as *The Deer Hunter*, in discussing Case's book, for among the blessings of the little village's severance from the outside is that mass-manufactured culture is no longer imported. Something is lost, yet something is gained. A character recalls "When Saugersville set fashions for itself/I mean to say we had our own ways here/That weren't the ways of Centerfield or Steck/Much less the ways of any city place/Where most of us had never been at all."

Rum and Coke and Clark Gable no longer exist, yet the community consensus is that "life is harder than it used to be/But troubles are more real....We're all of us more real, and more alive/And Saugersville is real, more like a town/And not a gas-pump on a concrete road."

Admittedly, our situation today is disanalogous to that in Case's poem. Televised agitprop from Team Blue and Team Red still pollutes our homes. But the response of ordinary folk to crisis is similar.

Although decades of post-nuclear war and zombie movies have conditioned us to expect all hell to break loose unless we are firmly guided by stern rulers, men and women in stressful times usually exhibit cooperative, even neighborly behavior.

The toilet paper hoarders and elbow-throwing shoppers so beloved by TV reporters are atypical. "Despite Hollywood's clichés to the contrary," writes *Reason*'s excellent Jesse Walker, "it is very rare for people to panic during an emergency. And the typical natural or technological disaster is followed not by a *Mad Max* war of all against all but by mutual aid in the rubble. Crime declines. Bottom-up cooperation flowers. Looting is rare, and when it does occur it usually amounts to scavenging, not theft."

In Saugersville, 11 months into the isolation, a young man of learning and ambition who chafes under the new dispensation has an epiphany as he skis the sloping fields outside the village:

"I am alive and this is where I live."

The realization fills him with joy and gratitude. May we in these strange days experience our own revelations. ■

Appalachian Grit

by GRACY OLMSTEAD

Hill Women: Finding Family and a Way Forward in the Appalachian Mountains, *Cassie Chambers, Ballantine Books, 304 pages*

Many places are judged by their wealth (or lack thereof). Those with a strong economy, elite schools, and a cornucopia of stores and restaurants are successes. Those without are failures. Invariably the question is: "What went wrong?"

Thus Appalachia—one of the poorest regions in the U.S., and home to overdose mortality rates 60 to 70 percent higher than the rest of the country—has become the focus of many articles and books of late, each trying to consider what went "wrong." Books like *Hillbilly Elegy* alerted many in America to the struggles of Appalachia and the brokenness of many families in its hollers. Rural writers like *Heartland* author Sarah Smarsh, on the other hand, have emphasized the importance of portraying the dignity of rural people, even when writing about poverty and decline.

Many rural economies have been subject to extractive practices for generations, which have slowly depleted local wealth and social capital, replacing them with a dearth of resources and hope. Economist John Ikerd has referred to this as "the economic colonization of rural America," and warns that it will continue to hurt the wellbeing and prosperity of the people who suffer from it.

Cassie Chambers's *Hill Women: Finding Family and a Way Forward in the Appalachian Mountains*, like Smarsh's Heartland, considers the dignity and resiliency of poor working-class families in this region of America. It is a book that seeks to offer a more nuanced look at people who have struggled and worked together in rural Appalachia for generations, focusing specifically on the Appalachian women who bind their families together, protect their kith and kin, and spur each other on to success.

Chambers spent many of her early years in Owsley County, Kentucky, working and living alongside her aunt, grandparents, and cousins outside Booneville. Her grandparents and aunt worked sharecropping tobacco and had done so for decades. But Chambers's mother, Wilma, moved to Berea for college, got married, and finished her degree while caring for her young daughter. This marks a turning point in Chambers's life. While her grandmother got married as a teenager and spent her life working the land, Wilma, with the help of a college degree, goes on to build a comfortable, middle-class life in Berea. Chambers considers the struggle and hardship her mother and father endured to "make it," as well as the sacrifices Wilma's sister and mother made to help her succeed. It's obvious that Wilma isn't better than the rest of her family. Rather, each of them gave up something to help her leave Booneville and finish college.

This book, then, is about the savvy, kindly hill women who stay in Booneville, and about the outliers (like Wilma and Cassie) who leave for college and greater opportunity. It is about the similarities they share and the cultural and educational divides that threaten to separate them.

Chambers is careful to show how little the working-class existence of her childhood hurt her chances for success. On the contrary, she learned resilience, grit, and loyalty from her mother and father, aunt and uncles, cousins and grandparents. All these skills, she argues, helped her to graduate from Yale. And all these strong ties to hill people, it seems, are what pulled her back to Appalachia after she graduated. She is one of the few and proud "returners" (or, as Wes Jackson and Smarsh would call them, "homecomers") who choose to invest their talents back in their rural context. While Chambers did not move back to Booneville or Berea, she has moved back to Kentucky—and has dedicated her law degree to helping other "hill women," women who have struggled with poverty, abuse, and the injustices of the courts. This book also considers their stories and struggles. Chambers writes of women who often don't have the money to navigate a complicated and expensive legal system, even when their safety and wellbeing are at risk, and considers the ways we could make justice more accessible.

This book shines early on, when Chambers writes about her forebears, her community, and its history. Granny, Aunt Ruth, and Wilma are fascinating and delightful people, and the stories of their labor and love are often staggering. Other women mentioned in the first part of the book, such as Eula Hall—who started

a health clinic to provide care to low-income Eastern Kentuckians—make clear the importance of Chambers's hill women. In one chapter, Chambers writes of the many ways that the Owsley County family helped her mother and father as they finished college. In another, she writes of a neighbor who installed a bathroom in her grandparents' house, out of his own pocket, after Chambers's grandfather became sick. "This neighbor knew Papaw, respected his work ethic and how he raised his family," she says. "He had experienced Granny's hospitality and kind smile. … He didn't have much money himself, but people were more important than dollars in the bank. He had to trust that if he was ever in need, someone would do the same for him."

Rural communities have often benefited, as Ikerd writes, from a strong gift economy: "'Giving someone a hand' wasn't limited to helping out in emergencies, but was given anytime someone 'needed a hand,'" he has written. "These communities, created out of necessity, were communities that not only helped rural people make a living but also gave them a common sense of purpose." A gift economy is difficult to quantify—but as Chambers and Ikerd make clear, it is a tangible means of cultivating wellbeing and belonging. Despite poverty and hardship, it indicates that community is working—even thriving—the way it should.

Unfortunately, the middle section of *Hill Women* is less entrancing. Here, the book diverges from its early promise—to tell the stories of forgotten or ignored hill women—to focus instead on Chambers's own life: her journey from Berea, to boarding school, to an Ivy League college. *Hill Women* wants to be both a personal memoir and a story about a place. In some ways, the two obviously overlap: Chambers grew up in Appalachia and is one of its hill women. But the introduction and title suggest that it means to tell the story of multiple hill women, and so the singular focus at the midway point is disappointing.

This is not to suggest that Chambers's story isn't fascinating and important. It is. But tales of her days at boarding school, her college boyfriend, and struggles with the meritocracy and class divides of Yale take up too many pages for a book that is supposed to be about Appalachia, about tales that "have ricocheted within the mountains, growing more faint with time," as Chambers puts it in her introduction. It could be that she ran out of stories, but those she does tell are so tantalizing, I left the book hungry for more. We've read memoirs about kids who left Appalachia for the big city and for Ivy League universities. I was eager to read more about the Aunt Ruths and Wilmas.

The ending of the book twists into politics—something it dabbles in throughout, but rarely focuses on. This makes sense, since Chambers is running for office, a member of the Democratic Party, and a staunch opponent of Trump. Her work to reform the legal system on behalf of her clients is interesting, but it again made the book feel a bit imbalanced. The early parts of *Hill Women* are far more focused on anecdotal history and stories of community resilience than on politics and policy. There's much that *could* be written about the forms of sharecropping that Chambers's family experienced, as well as the impact of coal mining and rural policy on communities like Booneville. But balancing the personal and political, anecdotal and philosophical, is no easy task.

These critiques aside, *Hill Women* is a lovely book about family, community, and place. The women who fill its pages (even those who appear and disappear within a few sentences) are fiery and fascinating, and I would welcome more stories from Chambers about the women she grew up with, and the women she currently advocates for in Kentucky. These are the stories of dignity and hope that we should be telling about our rural regions—stories that, rather than seeking to cast blame, show all the people and places worth emulating. ■

Gracy Olmstead is a writer and journalist located outside Washington, D.C. Follow her on Twitter at @GracyOlmstead.

The Radical Statesman of the Lake District

by WILLIAM ANTHONY HAY

Radical Wordsworth: The Poet Who Changed the World, *Jonathan Bate, Yale, 608 pages*

Revolution covers all manner of things. Often describing political and social upheaval or a sharp break with a previous condition, it also means the return to a previous state. Both capture facets of William Wordsworth, Jonathan Bate argues in his new biography of the poet, *Radical Wordsworth*.

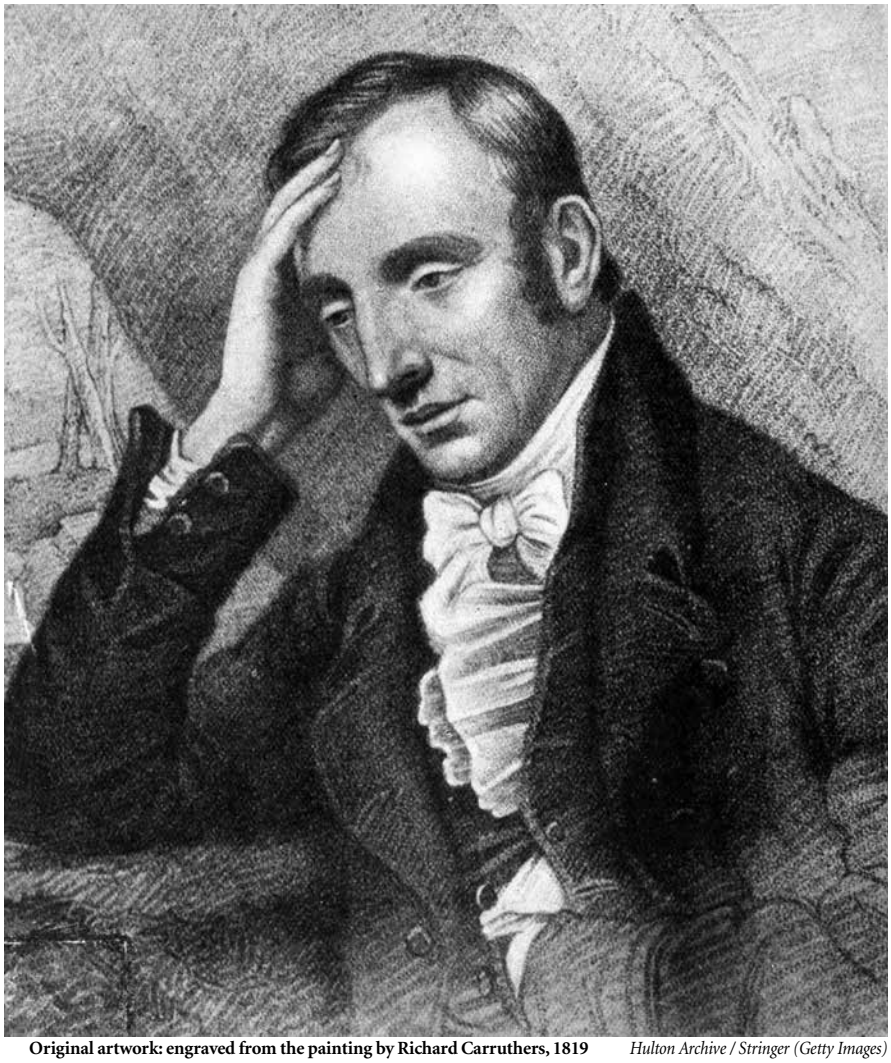
Born 250 years ago, Wordsworth transformed poetry and the ways people viewed childhood and the natural world. A central figure of the international movement that we now call Romanticism, Wordsworth was also a man committed to the corner of England that inspired his vision. The Lake District of Westmorland and Cumberland in England's remote north brought him more than formative experiences and material. It provided the home to which he always returned.

Place is at the center of the tensions in Wordsworth's life and work. For all his commitment to home in the Lake District, the poet had a wanderer's restless spirit. He loved to walk, covering some 175,000 miles over his lifetime. His long poem, *The Prelude*, may have started in the Lake District, but it took him to London, the Swiss Alps, and France. Moreover, much as he wrote of nature, as a teacher he always hungered for books and gratefully acknowledged how his writing drew upon reading. Romanticism has tensions of its own both in the debt owed to classical influences and conflicting political strains that developed from it. The young-radical-turned-middle-aged-conservative may be a cliché, but for Wordsworth it involved more than different stages of life.

Struggling himself with "how a poet who could be so good could also be so bad," Bate writes that his difficulty making students enthusiastic about Wordsworth led him to write a biography with a selective account of experiences that highlighted Wordsworth's movement from visionary poet to cultural force. An enthusiastic hiker who first encountered the poet on a childhood holiday in the Lake District, Bate has "walked" with Wordsworth throughout his career as a literary scholar at Oxford. Deliberately episodic, *Radical Wordsworth* sets the poet's life and work in context that reveals each's importance.

Born in 1770, Wordsworth spent his early years in wild landscapes that still inspire awe. The mountainous region named for the lakes amidst the rugged fellsides lacked the open fields elsewhere associated with rural England. Characterized by pastoral farming and smallholdings with a more egalitarian culture among farmers known as "statesmen," its poor roads until the later 18th century amplified its separateness. Wordsworth absorbed these influences before he was aware of them. His writing later tried to "recover the child's untrammeled and untroubled unity with the natural world," Bate writes, but growing up meant growing away from it.

Personal loss also marked Wordsworth's youth. Admitting that he remembered little of his mother, her death when he was seven—"the onset," Bate writes, "of enduring childhood memory"—left him "an outcast, bewildered and depressed." It splintered the family with children fostered among relatives before William went away to grammar school. His father John died when he was 13, another formative age. These deaths, and Wordsworth's sense of losing a child's feeling of nature, give his poetry an elegiac tone as he later strove to preserve the past "by locking in a personal story before memory vanishes with age."



Original artwork: engraved from the painting by Richard Carruthers, 1819 *Hulton Archive / Stringer (Getty Images)*

School at Hawkswood made him a classicist, with the Latin poet Ovid, famed for imagery blending human and non-human, a lasting influence. Along with Milton and Shakespeare among older poets, he also learned from William Cowper and Thomas Gray. Bate shows how Wordsworth joined a more individual voice and "particularity lodged in personal memory" with "the art of sermonizing on nature."

At Cambridge, Wordsworth gained "confidence that the past masters could be as friends rather than inhibiting shadows." Bate praises the way his early verse captures "the combination of excitement and anticipation" that undergraduates typically feel in their early weeks at university. Instead of following an uncle into an academic career, Wordsworth found his vocation in poetry.

Travel to other parts of England and a tour in Switzerland gave him the opportunity to capture his emotional response to other landscapes. The most dramatic encounters came in France as a 20-year-old political pilgrim. Wordsworth's famous lines "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive / But to be young was the very heaven" evoke first impressions of the French Revolution he sought later to preserve.

An introduction to Jacques Pierre Brissot, leader of the Girondin faction, drew Wordsworth into the thick of the action in Paris. Moving to the provinces, however, introduced him

to royalists. One of them, Marie-Anne Vallons, became his language tutor, then lover, before falling pregnant with Wordsworth's daughter. Impending war separated them as he fled across the channel to find employment to support them. While the details remain obscure, a brief return likely made Wordsworth a witness to his friend Jean-Antone Gorsas's execution on the guillotine before a baying crowd.

Wordsworth remained a political radical in a circle that included William Godwin and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Dorothy, the sister with whom he reunited, became a vital partner. Coleridge served as a sounding board and advocate whose philosophical mind focused Wordsworth's reflections on nature and sympathy for the poor. Dorothy's notebooks with observations from their travels gave him material for work that democratized poetry.

Bate calls *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection Wordsworth and Coleridge first published in 1798, "a cultural revolution in its way as radical as the political revolution" in France. Combining the elevated form of lyric with the vernacular ballad, as the title announced, gave voice to ordinary people rather than the heroes and rulers poetry typically celebrated. Wordsworth's preface insisted that materials for poetry "are to be found in every subject which can interest the human mind." Breaking with conventions that used the poor as either picturesque details in a scene or objects of pity, he took people as he found them. Wordsworth freed sensibility from formality and artificial poeticisms to connect the mind with nature and give scenes new immediacy. William Hazlitt, the first outsider to see the work, called the result "a pure emanation of the age" and praised him as "the most original poet now living."

This accomplishment originally involved turning familiar trends in a new direction. Nature had long figured in poetry, and sensibility, as Jane Austen understood, defined the age. But powerful feeling, for Wordsworth, was not just an emotional release. It was shaped by experience. Reality added to its force. Indeed, Wordsworth disliked the false excitement of Gothic fiction precisely because it created unnatural feeling. Romanticism, as Bate points out, had different strains with different influences on autobiography and autobiographical literary creation. Wordsworth's *Excursion* and *Prelude*, along with other works, made him the first to pursue autobiography and autobiographical literary creation "with absolute self-consciousness." The way he did so taught readers, as Matthew Arnold observed after Wordsworth's death, how to feel.

Did prosperity, marriage, and improving finances turn the radical Wordsworth into a conservative?

Did prosperity, marriage, and improving finances turn radical Wordsworth into a conservative? The poet's commitment to place resolves a tension in his career Bate finds overstated. The Lake District's "statesmen," whose landholdings embodied a democratic culture similar to what he later found among the Swiss, formed a society Wordsworth idealized. Sympathy made him take their side against elites, adventurers, and political innovation. Wordsworth not only introduced the Lake country to the world, he stood as its defender.

Bate mentions Francis Jeffrey's attack on Wordsworth in the *Edinburgh Review* that labeled his circle the Lake Poets, but another clash also bears mention. Wordsworth led a political campaign against Jeffrey's fellow reviewer Henry Brougham who sought three times to win election as MP for Westmorland. Brougham, a counterpart to Daniel O'Connell and Andrew Jackson as demagogue and reformer, represented forces of progress against the Tory interest led by Lord Lonsdale who had settled debts to the Wordsworth family that his cousin, the previous earl, owed. Wordsworth's perception of the mercurial Brougham's threat to the county turned the poet into a politician whose "Two Addresses to the Freeholders of Westmorland" marked one of the era's most powerful expressions of conservative thought.

Robert Browning attacked Wordsworth for his apostasy in an 1845 poem "The Lost Leader," but, whatever their later political differences, Hazlitt still praised his genius. Wordsworth's attention to nature's healing power and ordinary voices reflected his commitment to a place that made him revolutionary. Bate shows how he broke with poetic conventions and pioneered innovative ways of thinking about the self and nature, but Wordsworth also turned back to home, childhood, and memory. His thought has shaped more than poetry and our view of childhood, inspiring things as far afield as conservation movements in Britain and the United States. But in the end, it is Wordsworth's melding of change with a striving for continuity that makes him still worth reading. ■

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Protean Progressivism

by **STEPHEN J. PHILLIPS**

Progressivism: The Strange History of a Radical Idea, *Bradley C. S. Watson, University of Notre Dame Press, 260 pages*

"This is not who we are," President Obama used to say when something unbecoming to his progressivism occurred. Few caught the statement's colossal presumptuousness, casually arrogating progressivism's pieties to America's larger sense of self. "So diffuse and pervasive is the progressive outlook," wrote the critic George Scialabba in 1991, "that merely to articulate it is an achievement."

In 2020, progressivism appears hale. Will the hordes elect a revanchist president? Per Martin Luther King's formulation—also invoked by Obama—the justice-bound "arc of the moral universe is *long*." In the meantime, let a million lawn-signs bloom, proclaiming fidelity to progressive catechisms and injunctions to "Resist!" (as if Emma Goldman and not some account executive or corporate VP resides within).

Yet it's also showing signs of wear. Progressivism is increasingly unhinged in its policing of discourse, confounded by the recrudescence of forces like nationalism—supposedly consigned to the garbage can marked "wrong side of history"—and estranged from working-class constituents. The ideology itself has become tangled in conflicting moral imperatives and its confused jumble of causes, both in pursuit of chimerical goals and mired in glum introspection. The highest state to which many progressives aspire seems to be self-awareness of their own privilege (though they're conveniently obtuse to the status conferred by flaunting their exquisitely modulated penitence).

"Late capitalism" is a phrase du jour, but what about "late progressivism?" Another Brahmin gloss on our times is the Trump administration as "hyperreal" spectacle—a Kremlin/Fox News-inflected gilded simulacrum of reality. But how does some variant of this not also apply to contemporary progressivism, with its conspiratorial claims of Russian skullduggery and unfalsifiable assertions of pervasive discrimination? Or the histrionics of media impeachment coverage, played out before a bored, listless public gallery?

Then there's a resurgent interest in the works of Christopher Lasch with their astringent critique of progressivism and disinterring of "communitarian" traditions.

All of this is converging on a sense of progressivism as one among, as the English philosopher John Gray put it recently, "plural and contending" value systems, subject to its own folkways, mythos, *weltanschauung*, and prejudices.

Bradley C. S. Watson's *Progressivism: The Strange History of a Radical Idea* had me with the word "strange." Progressivism today is strange. Meanwhile, Trump's election has spawned a shelf of histories and ethnographies about the white working class: how refreshing to see progressivism come in for similar treatment. And presumably Watson, a political science professor at Pennsylvania's Saint Vincent College, didn't have to repair to Appalachian Ohio to conduct his fieldwork.

Wrong meeting. Actually, Watson's *Progressivism* is a history of the histories—refracted through the exigencies of the presents in which they were written—by which received wisdom about early 20th-century progressivism came down to us, and the revisionism underway since the 1980s. Since that time, acolytes of the German émigré scholar Leo Strauss have become associated with the "Claremont School," a colony of constitutional conservative political scientists, and coalesced at California's Claremont Colleges, Watson among them.

Historical depictions of progressivism served to domesticate the movement, he writes, emphasizing, variously, its congruence with prior U.S. history, diffuse non-doctrinaire populist character, small-bore nature (rooted in the "status anxiety" of its supposed middle-class tribunes) and—mediated by the New Left—essentially conservative cast as a tool of big business.

The conservative counter-narrative holds that these accounts, oblivious to their own editorializing, resoundingly undersold progressivism. It posits that progressivism—imbued with social Darwinism, pragmatism, Hegel's exaltation of the state and "social gospel" Christianity—was deeply transgressive of the founders' Constitution. The older tradition was recast from transcendent holy writ to historical artifact belonging to an earlier, and thus less-evolved, era—a dead letter straitjacketing the Prometheus of government amid the imperative to reform the social ills attending industrialization and urbanization. Extolling an infinitely extensible "living Constitution" and conceiving of man as "morally perfectible" within a Whiggish teleology trending toward ever more "freedom, justice, and truth," progressivism represented a "pivot point" in U.S. history. It sanctioned the projection of state authority into what had hitherto been considered the preserve of civil society (recast as a redoubt of corruption) and private conscience, elevating a proto-administrative state of technocrats. At the same time, the progressives ushered in today's heroic conception of the presidency as a seat of enlightened moral agency, as it judiciously marshals "popular will" and the forces of history.

Fixated on the figure of Woodrow Wilson (with his glinting pince-nez, priggish Victorian Dad mien, and anti-suffrage segregationist views, a suitably unambiguous villain), this is the wrong-turn narrative espoused in the Tea Party-era pedagogy of Glenn Beck. And Watson's *Progressivism* is in part an account of the academics working upstream of Beck and his chalkboard. But it's also a chronicle of the Straussian reckoning with progressivism: a cadre of scholars, governed by the conviction that "moral-political understandings" can transcend "time and place," who accorded progressivism's architects the dignity of taking them at their word, rather than reflexively discounting this as a product of self-interested historical actors' "false consciousness." It's a reminder of one of progressivism's blind spots—in English soccer parlance, its inclination to play the man, not the ball.

Many of Watson's historical observations about germinal-stage progressivism could have been written of its current form. He remarks on the juxtaposition between its eyes-on-the-prize goal orientation and disdain for attaining popular assent to its reform agenda, witnessed in Wilson's withering condescension toward "public criticism" as a "clumsy nuisance, a rustic handling delicate machinery." And he draws a throughline from the God-bothering messianism of early progressives like Walter Rauschenbusch to sanctimonious social-justice activists.

But how far is today's progressivism really descended from the 1900s version? University of Virginia political scientist James Ceaser has described the former as a compound of original progressivism, multiculturalism, and postmodernism, with an admixture of countercultural emphasis on personal growth. Still, Watson crystalizes an inalienable aspect to progressivism past and present: its protean, remorselessly acquisitive nature, ever on the lookout for the next moral improvement project (and the political clients this yields).

Progressivism is an uneven book. *Claremont Review of Books* editor Charles R. Kesler contributes a foreword and figures in an exploration of the intellectual genealogy of the conservative challenge to the liberal consensus on progressivism, but excerpts from Kesler's book, *I Am the Change*, materialize in the text as if delivered from on high, sending the reader to the endnotes for their provenance. One learns much from Watson's survey of the literature about the historiography of progressivism, but soon wises up to his modus operandi of arraigning its works—finding each in error for slighting progressivism's subversion of the Constitution. And Watson's otherwise felicitous prose is marred by occasional archaic locutions. The obscure Latinate "in fine" is preferred to "in short," and I thought "desuetude" had passed into… desuetude. The Dwight Macdonald line about a work having "enriched my vocabulary, or, more accurately, added to it," comes to mind.

But ultimately *Progressivism* is insightful and rewarding. And Watson owns the prejudices of his cohort, referring to the "deep attachment to the Constitution and to the regime that is experienced by the revisionists."

This is more than can be said for progressives with their avowals that their creed is reality itself. "[I]n truth," Watson writes, "liberalism was all about theory from the very beginning." ■

Stephen Phillips has reviewed numerous books for The Spectator, Economist, Weekly Standard, Wall Street Journal, *and* Times Literary Supplement.

The Virtuous Cycle

by MICHAEL HENDRIX

A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream, *Yuval Levin, Basic Books, 205 pages*

Greece is a stage, and every Greek is an actor," wrote the Roman poet Juvenal, and so it is in the America depicted in Yuval Levin's *A Time to Build*. As a leading conservative intellectual, Levin has a front-row seat to the deformed dramas playing out in our nation's capital and beyond. And what he sees worries him, for not only do the leads not seem to know their parts—neither do we. Congressmen fail to act like they are in Congress, educators fail to educate, pastors betray the pastorate—and we feel like we are alone, fast losing faith in America's institutions.

That word, institutions, does the heavy lifting in Levin's book, helping us peer behind the curtains, so to speak, to better understand how the scripted reality drama that is this American life went so off the rails. Institutions are what Levin describes as the "durable forms of our common life," which we see running in concentric circles outward from family, community, religion, education, work, and on to politics. These forms of association don't only connect us; they shape us.

Which is why it should concern us that Americans have so quickly lost trust in these institutions. We are more likely to be wealthier, safer, and healthier than at any time in American history, yet somehow the stories that Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker tells of our life together feel riddled with plot holes. (All the more so for life in a time of pandemic, but more on that later.) What of our "loneliness and isolation, mistrust and suspicion, alienation and polarization," as Levin describes? What of the trust broken in a congregation by priests sexually abusing boys? We tend to blame these distempers and

evils on the elites, who have most certainly failed us, yet somehow drowning them in our resentments never seems to cure our social ills.

But we are nothing if not entertained. Would you like to have the number one podcast in the country? Get elected to Congress. There you may join that great chorus of pundits performing their outrage before breathless cable news audiences, acting as if they were outsiders to the very institution they were elected to serve. "They remain intensely ambitious, as politicians always are," observes Levin, "but their ambition is for a prominent role in the cultural theater of our national politics, and they view the institution of Congress as a particularly prominent stage in that theater." And you won't want to miss Season Four of the Trump White House.

Institutions are meant to be *formative* rather than performative, Levin explains. Political parties, for instance, have traditionally used their strength to privately mold their members into something resembling Republicans and Democrats. But there are cameras now, and they throw a harsh light on Congress's "inner life" while luring the individual member into the cult of celebrity. No wonder there is so much partisan rancor. Much like social media and its own outrages, we hardly know what is public or private anymore.

Elsewhere, educational institutions are meant to offer some mix of skills, morals, and wisdom. Instead, they've become training grounds for a culture war weaponized by moral activism. In 1976, journalists were trusted by 72 percent of Americans. Now, shrunken to a coastal band of elites, they find themselves overwhelmingly distrusted and competing with de-institutionalized amateurs. Even the most basic of institutions, the family, has suffered from the decline of marriage rates and childbearing. For many, marriage unions today are simply another form of self-expression.

The chapters in *A Time to Build* read like nearly self-contained essays, unsurprisingly so as they draw on Levin's 2018 lectures at Princeton. He weaves a thread of institutional breakdown and culture war through every tear in our social fabric so that we may see it fraying more clearly. It is almost too much to take in. A simpler book would have argued that everything is downstream of the culture war. But once you see America through the lens of institutions, you can't unsee it.

As Robert Nisbet observed in 1975, we seem to be living in the twilight of Western history: "Processes of decline and erosion of institutions are more evident than those of genesis and development. Something like a vacuum obtains in the moral order for large numbers of people." Vacuums are by their nature an absence of something, further straining our efforts to see what might be wrong in what Levin terms the "invisible realm" of institutions.

But crises have a way of undressing emperors. The rapid spread of a novel coronavirus from Wuhan to the world—and the blundering response by policymakers at its outset—seemed to reveal our institutions as uniquely incapable today. The health of our institutions is a matter of life and death now. And in a moment when "social distancing" is the watchword, we feel the loneliness and isolation endemic to our age of individualism. Technology may broker lost connections, but it also buffers us, providing light contact without the weight of intimacy.

As the Israeli politician Abba Eban concluded, "[m]en and nations behave wisely when they have exhausted all other resources." America's great reserves are even now spinning up medical remedies and economic stimulus in the face of global pandemic. Levin's central thesis—that "this is not a time for tearing down" but a "time to build"—is more relevant than ever. And as we witness the biggest disruption to America's associational life in generations with the emptying of restaurants, bars, gyms, and every place of gathering, the call for social replenishment in its wake will rightly demand a lot from us and our elites.

This is where Levin gets personal, almost as a counselor. Institutions, after all, rest on individuals practicing virtue. It is not enough to call someone else toward duty and devotion or to handwave generally in the direction of reforming some philosophical notion of institutions. Rather, we should aim to kickstart virtuous cycles of personal responsibility that call us to ask ourselves, "What choices and behaviors are appropriate given my position?" For elites, this question will demand more and expect less of them.

Journalists, for instance, are likely called to shy away from celebrity and focus simply on being go-to sources for information. Members of Congress should take a cue from their younger colleagues not running for president—like Sen. Mike Lee of Utah or Rep. Mike Gallagher of Wisconsin—and prioritize becoming real institutionalists rather than cynical insiders masquerading as performative outsiders. Academia should, well, focus more on academics.

A Time to Build is literally a modest proposal. There's no revolution here, just a call for rebuilding institutions with a "greater awareness of how integrity, trust, confidence, belonging, and meaning are established in our lives." But such virtues are considered stuffy or even outright bad today, especially for elites. Institutionalism itself seems to run against the grain of America's ethos of individual liberty, which is still present in how today's political parties view institutions and is reinforced by our modern affluence. That makes Levin's call to rebuild much harder than it seems, but no less necessary.

Yuval Levin narrates a new story: one of personal virtue and flourishing institutions working together in a "virtuous cycle" to form us for freedom. In this account, we also know the demands of our respective callings—and institutions beget virtue, themselves becoming worthy of trust. They stand in contrast to the "vicious cycles" we find ourselves stuck in today, full of institutional degradation and entertaining vice.

We know the status quo will not hold. Levin is a clear voice from another age, calling us forward to build our institutions anew. ■

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The Skeptic

ARAM BAKSHIAN JR.

Reflections in a Time of Plague

By the middle of March, civilization as I knew it had ceased to exist. Even before the federal government launched its draconian measures, my native Washington decided to close all restaurants and bars to slow the spread of what a politically-incorrect friend has dubbed "The Insidious Flu Manchu." Only then did I realize how much of my social life revolved around getting together with friends at the Cosmos Club, the Press Club, the Café Mozart, the Prime Rib, the Hay-Adams bar, and assorted other old-line dining and drinking establishments where my boon companions are mostly conservative but the pours are always liberal.

For more than 50 years, I have guided my leisure time by Dr. Samuel Johnson's maxim that, in good company, "a tavern chair" can be "the throne of felicity." As I write this, the throne is vacant and I often feel a bit like one of those forlorn Jacobite exiles wandering an alien world in hopes that someday, somehow, the king will enjoy his own again.

I was rescued from such gloomy ruminations when another of Dr. Johnson's aphorisms came to mind: "You may depend upon it, sir, when a man knows that he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." With the current sense of doom literally going viral—and with more than enough time for solitary reflections—I found that my mind really was concentrating wonderfully. Rather than wallowing in the daily scare headlines, I started to think about underlying causes, not of the virus, but of the spiritual ills that threatened our society long before its outbreak, and will continue to do so long after it has vanished.

My thoughts were further focused by something I came across while reviewing Yuval Levin's "A Time to Build" for another publication. In his book, Mr. Levin quoted a hauntingly prescient 1973 statement by the brilliant American sociologist Robert Nisbet. From time to time in history, Nisbet maintained, "twilight ages make their appearance. Processes of decline and erosion of institutions are more evident than those of genesis and development. Something like a vacuum obtains in the moral order for large numbers of people ... Individualism reveals itself less as achievement and enterprise than as egoism and mere performance … There is a widely expressed sense of degradation of values and of corruption of culture."

Boy, did he get that one right. And if ever America has entered a "twilight age" it is in the not-so-sweet here and now. But twilight ages need not be terminal. Just as the sun sets each evening only to rise again the next morning, twilight ages can be dispelled by fresh light. Sometimes they are and sometimes they aren't. Ancient Rome, for example, went through numerous cycles of decline and revival before succumbing to total collapse.

Closer to home, and in a more compressed time frame, the same thing happened to the British Empire. In the late 18th century, Great Britain had lost the jewel in its crown, its 13 American colonies. It also contended with grinding poverty, growing social unrest, economic disruption, and a loss of faith in traditional institutions, most notably the corrupt and enervated Church of England.

Yet within a generation, the British successfully resisted the revolutionary mob terror that overran much of Europe, and ultimately defeated the attempts of Napoleon to establish a pan-European military dictatorship with global designs. By the middle of the next century, the Victorian era witnessed the apogee of British power and influence. More importantly, it also marked the rise of a morally renewed society. As historian Geoffrey Treasure points out, some of the earliest efforts were "directed towards the improvement of the upper classes where ... cynicism and loose morals stemmed from the decline of personal religion and the increase of wealth, without a corresponding sense of duty." Simultaneously, a religious revival both within and outside of the Church of England led the way for mass literacy and education movements, early legal protections for the working poor, and an incredible burst of economic, scientific, social, and medical progress. Great Britain had emerged from a twilight age and entered an age of unparalleled achievement both morally and materially.

While too many of our young people are growing up without organized religion, ignorant of history, bombarded by the blandishments of a corrupt popular culture and, more and more often, without the benefit of a married father and mother, 75 percent of Americans still ascribe to a religious faith. The majority of the latter, 63 percent, identify as Christian. Skeptic though I am about the ability of politicians and so-called "public intellectuals" to work social miracle cures for the rest of us, I believe that America's current "twilight age" could be the prelude to a revival that many, if not most, Americans recognize as needed—and even more hope for in their hearts. ■

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