the weekly Standard

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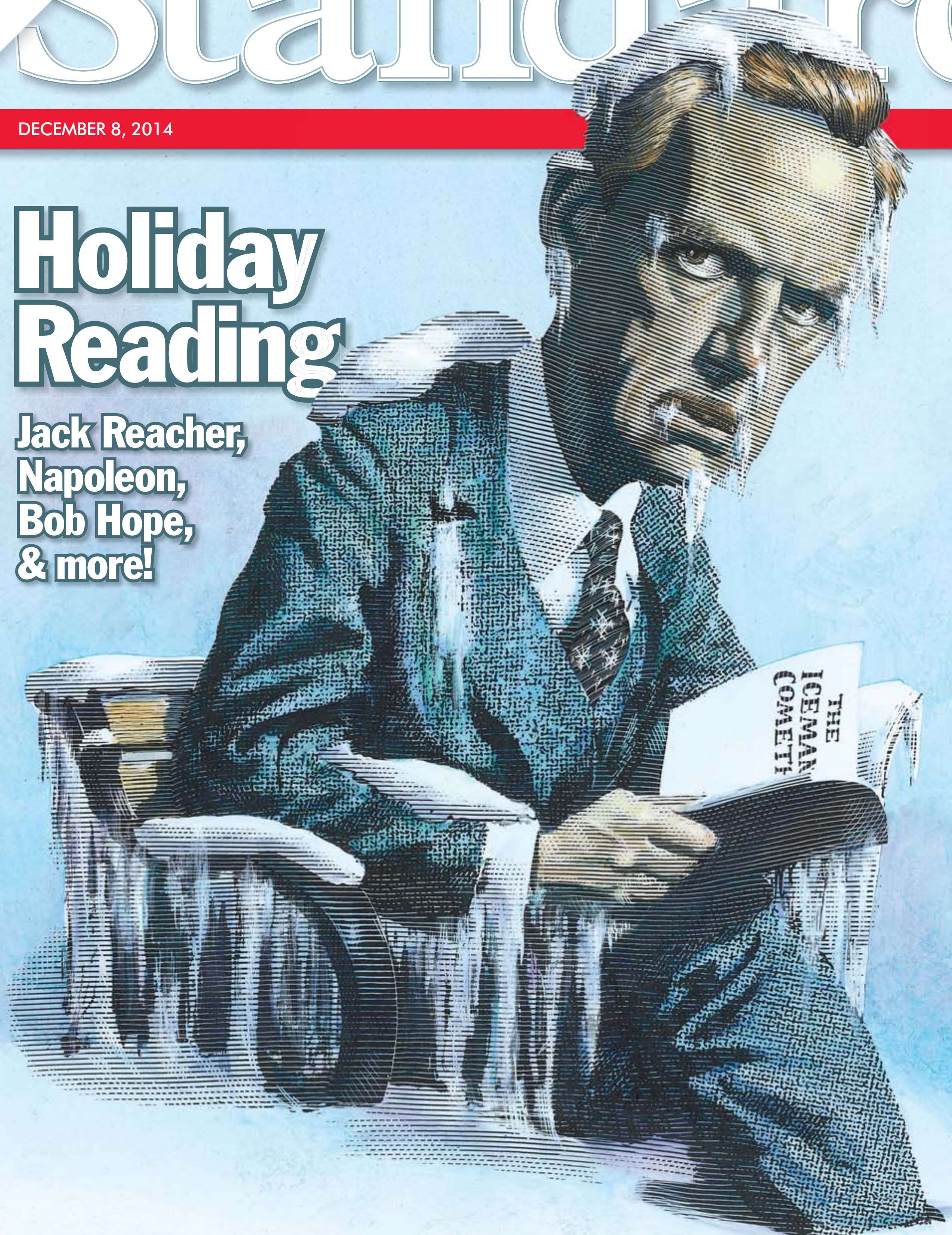

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The Benghazi Whitewash

On Friday, November 21, the Republican-majority House Intelligence Committee released a report about the CIA and the intelligence community's conduct in the terror attack on the U.S. compound in Benghazi, Libya. The report uncritically accepted the CIA's defense of its conduct, and so reporters hastened to accuse previous Republican inquiries and hearings into Benghazi of being illegitimate political theater. *National Journal*'s Ron Fournier said the "GOP should be ashamed." *Politico*'s Michael Grunwald said the report suggested "Benghazi wasn't really a scandal." The *Atlantic*'s Conor Friedersdorf suggested "audiences of conservative sites [should] express anger at being misled about Benghazi for so long."

It would be nice if the journalists using the report as a cudgel read the thing. The report is for the most part more damning than the gloss reporters are putting on it. And the parts that aren't damning are a classic Washington whitewash. It is in no way a complete overview of all that happened on that fateful day of September 11, 2012, nor does it review the conduct of everyone involved. And one of the central facts confirmed by the report is an indictment of the mainstream media coverage of Benghazi. (Here's one of the things that should have tipped off reporters about the weaknesses in the report: It unironically uses the phrase "mistakes were made" on page one.)

So what does the report get right? To start with, last December the *New York Times* ran a lengthy piece the paper claimed was based on months of investigation, concluding there was "no evidence that Al Qaeda or other international terrorist groups had any role in the assault" and "it was fueled in large part by anger at an American-made video denigrating Islam." This conclusion was preposterous, and The Weekly Standard's Stephen Hayes (as well as our contributor Thomas Joscelyn) quickly debunked it. Nonetheless, this remained the "official" version of events right up until hours before the House report dropped confirming that, yes, Benghazi was an al Qaeda attack and, no, it had absolutely nothing to do with a video. That morning, the *Times* revised its version of events. But soon, everyone in the media was too busy wrongly using the report to shame Republicans to note the stunning journalistic failure.

And notably, the report reviewed only CIA conduct—it did not review the State Department's actions (or lack thereof). The report notes, "The State Department had contracted with the February 17th Brigade" to provide security in Benghazi. Interestingly enough, the report does not note the full name—the "February 17th Martyrs Brigade," or that the group is now allied with Ansar al Sharia, which led the attack that night. It would be nice to know more about how this security decision was made, but if the media asked reasonable questions it might put a damper on publishing op-eds from Clintonistas such as Lanny Davis demanding the GOP investigate itself in the wake of the report. Team Hillary is hoping the report will divorce Hillary from any responsibility for the Benghazi tragedy. It assuredly does not.

Finally, the report details a disconcerting version of events showing how the Obama administration's Benghazi talking points were crafted in a highly politicized and flawed process. If you think the administration denied known facts about al Qaeda's involvement in favor of blaming a YouTube video, attacking the First Amendment, and putting the president's reelection above the truth—the report lends credibility to this version of events. The report has numerous other problems (The Scrapbook's friend Mollie Hemingway published a 6,000-word account at the *Federalist* of "20 ways the media completely misread" the report, and she was only summarizing). The Scrapbook encourages you to read the report for yourself. Heaven knows the media have no plans to bother. ♦

Marion Barry's Legacy

The death of Marion Barry last week inspired all the usual observations: that he was the son of a Mississippi sharecropper; that he was a veteran, albeit a minor one, of the civil rights movement; that he was better known for his scandals, as mayor of the District of Columbia, than for his achievements, such as they were; that he had a fervent following in the community that remained loyal unto death; that once, in his 1980s heyday, he pronounced himself "mayor for life."

The Scrapbook has always assumed that the last self-description was delivered tongue-in-cheek, but with Mayor Barry, you could never be sure. Indeed, from The Scrapbook's perspective, the enduring significance of Marion Barry has little to do with the man himself and everything to do with the cause he championed through four tumultuous mayoral terms: statehood for Washington, D.C. If Barry's life and work has any historic resonance, it is the incontrovertible fact that the city of Washington, D.C., will never become a state of the union. Congressional Democrats may support that idea, and Democratic presidents (Carter, Clinton, Obama) may pay lip service to it; but it won't happen. And Marion Barry explains why.

The nation's capital, defined by the

Constitution as "the seat of the Government" under its federal enclave provision, is in reality a middle-sized city which has shrunk in acreage since it was founded, and in population (646,000) since the 1950s. It is true that residents of the District have but one nonvoting representative in Congress—although one could argue that it is represented by Congress as a whole—and that their self-government is limited by the jurisdiction of Congress. But no one is obliged by law to maintain residency in Washington, D.C., and there is little sentiment outside the metropolitan area to bestow statehood status on a midsized metropolis whose principal industry is politics and government.

The only reason anyone outside of Washington ever heard of Marion Barry—or was aware that the District of Columbia has an elected mayor—was his well-publicized misconduct in the 1980s and '90s. America has its share of buffoonish public servants, and the occasional politician-criminal; Barry's distinction was the special embarrassment his misdeeds attached to the capital of the United States of America.

He was neither the first elected mayor since the District of Columbia was granted limited home rule in 1967, nor was he the first African-American mayor. But he was, thus far, the only one to spend time in prison—and in so doing, kept the notion of statehood for Washington, D.C., off the table, probably for good. ♦

Virginia vs. the EPA?

The Obama administration's recently announced Clean Air Act power-plant rules, advertised as helping to control the greenhouse gases that cause climate change, have almost nothing to recommend them. Complex, clunky, and burdensome, they're likely to spike energy bills while doing almost nothing to control pollution or stop global warming.

Despite some pleasant-sounding talk about flexibility and choice, as currently drafted, the rules offer states few options beyond heavy-handed command-and-control oversight of fixed source carbon-dioxide emitters (coal-fired power plants and the like). Even the awful Waxman-Markey cap and trade bill that passed the Democratic-controlled House in 2009 suspended authority to issue regulations like the ones the Obama administration has now imposed.

That's why it's more than a bit heartening that a few states are fighting back in a constructive way, one that neither accepts the administration's bureaucratic meddling nor ignores greenhouse gas emissions. In language that only a bureaucrat could love, the Commonwealth of Virginia has asked that it be allowed to interpret "40 C.F.R. §60.21 and §60.24(b)(1) permit §111(d) emission guidelines to . . . devise broader, more creative, and more effective options to address compliance from affected [power plants] than now contemplated." The EPA, Virginia says, should also "remove any doubts that novel approaches will be encouraged and accepted."

In plain language, this is an important if cheeky request: If the EPA will allow it, Virginia regulators would like to kick the agency out for all intents and purposes and replace command-and-control regulation with a better system of its own devising.

While a piecemeal state-by-state

approach probably doesn't make for the best possible economic policy—economists from both the left and right agree it would be better to tax greenhouse gas emissions at a single national rate—the politics of what Virginia may want to do are great. With one fell swoop, state officials could kick out federal regulators, end the burdens they impose, and follow any number of courses, ranging from the state's own carbon tax (which could be used to cut other taxes) to a lighter-handed, more localized approach to regulation. Having such options is particularly important to Virginia, which, under Democratic and Republican administrations alike, has done a lot to reduce carbon-dioxide emissions in ways that current centrally planned rules just don't acknowledge.

Virginia is currently under a Democratic governor who implicitly accepts that the Obama administration is trying to confront a real problem, albeit in a ham-handed way. Thus, the Virginia approach isn't likely to win many conservative plaudits. But if the EPA can be convinced to say "yes" and allow Virginia to go forward, it will present a path that turns a burdensome regulatory framework into an opportunity for policy innovation. ♦

Sentences We Didn't Finish

'The St. Louis County grand jury's decision not to indict the white police officer who in August shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, would have generated widespread anger and disappointment in any case. But the county prosecutor, Robert McCulloch, who is widely viewed in the minority community as being in the pockets of the police, made matters infinitely worse . . . " ("The Meaning of the Ferguson Riots," *New York Times*, Nov. 25). ♦

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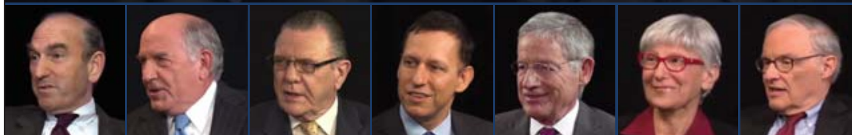

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Voice of Experience

I've lately had the pleasure of being interviewed on John Batchelor's cerebral radio program, which originates in New York but is heard all over the country. Since I am in Washington, and not New York, I speak to Mr. Batchelor by telephone—which means that his millions of listeners hear but do not see the person identified as "Philip Terzian." I may well be the only one of his guests who thinks about such things, but there's a reason.

Almost exactly 40 years ago, when I was employed as a baby editor at another magazine in Washington, its small but ambitious book division reprinted a collection of short stories by Mordecai Richler (1931-2001) entitled *The Street* (1975). Richler, the Jewish-Canadian novelist and essayist, was then at the height of his renown, largely based on the 1974 movie version of his 1959 novel *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*.

There was a very modest author's tour—a series of radio and television interviews in Washington and Baltimore—and it was my job to collect Richler at his hotel and ferry him from venue to venue in my Fiat. So naïve was I at the time that it never occurred to me afterwards to seek reimbursement for gas and mileage, or for the lunch I underwrote, during our literary journey. But I was interested to spend a day in the company of a famous novelist, and curious about the rituals of TV and radio interviews.

Since our first appointment was in Baltimore, I collected Richler at the Madison Hotel in Washington very nearly at dawn. He looked like the proverbial unmade bed: His clothes were loosely worn and appropriately rumpled, his face was pasty, and his hair unkempt. It was obvious that he welcomed neither the task at hand nor the hour of day; but to his credit, he spared me blame and faced our schedule not with anger but resignation.

I was embarrassed by the fact that I had neither read nor seen *Duddy Kravitz*; worse, I was unaware of Richler's having lived until recently in London, which would have given me a conversational gambit. But no matter: As we drove out of Washington and onto the Capital Beltway, he stretched out as much as possible in a Fiat and dozed off. I remember when the giant Mormon Temple loomed into view—it had just been constructed, and as the sun rose was bathed in unearthly light—he awoke with a start, and we laughed together.

GARY LOCKE

The first interview was on an early-morning television talk show. Richler was not happy about the prospect, and I didn't know what to expect. The interviewer was one of those well-groomed TV types with mellifluous voice and unctuous manner. But he taught me an important lesson about appearances: The interviewer seemed to have actually read *The Street*, and his questions were intelligent, respectful, and shrewdly designed to draw out his reluctant subject. It was one of the better interviews of the day, perhaps the best.

What Richler made of all this I cannot say, for he tended toward monosyllables and preferred, in my case, to talk of other things. But I know that he was angered, at one point, by an interviewer who accused him of abetting antisemitism with his working-class, sometimes-less-than-heroic Jewish characters.

He handled such questions, I should say, with practiced skill; but they might well have bothered him more than I perceived, for at the first opportunity during a break between appointments, he insisted that we find a place to get a drink. I cannot now remember the hour of the morning, but it was well before lunchtime, and my appetite for alcohol—never strong—was nonexistent. I smiled and chattered away self-consciously while Richler consumed a giant Bloody Mary.

And that was the pattern for the balance of the day: interview followed by cocktails followed by interview. I remember that he was asked questions by a youthful Maury Povich, and was joined in the studio by the *New Yorker* writer Michael J. Arlen, plugging *Passage to Ararat* (1975)—followed by drinks. But with one more radio interview, by phone, to go, Richler informed me that he just couldn't do it, and insisted that I transport him back to the Madison.

Which I did. This left me with no choice but to save my own job. I drove back to the magazine offices in Washington, closed my door, dialed the number of the station in question—and identified myself as "Mordecai Richler." The interview was brief and slightly nerve-wracking, but comparatively easy: I had listened to the same questions and answers for hours and, if I may say, did a fair imitation of Richler's low-pitched voice. I am happy to report that when Richler heard the story, a quarter-century later, he remembered nothing. But he laughed.

Philip Terzian

the weekly Standard

No Deal

So the November 24 deadline for reaching a comprehensive agreement with Iran over its nuclear program—itself an extension of an earlier deadline—has come and gone with a whimper, and with another extension. The frenetic, feverish, and foolish pursuit of a deal by the Obama administration, marked by one concession after another to Iran, raised the real possibility that the United States and its international partners would make a historically dangerous mistake that could ensure a nuclear-weapons-capable Iran in short order. It was something of a relief when Iranian obstinacy again saved the day, and the parties in Vienna merely agreed to extend the talks.

The focus in America quickly shifted to sanctions, and whether the deterioration of the sanctions regime engineered by the Obama administration a year ago could be halted, and sanctions now strengthened. We strongly support an urgent congressional effort along these lines. But it's also time to step back and ask how we got to the point where the United States is begging a third-rate power like Iran to make a deal that undermines our strategic interests and those of our allies. Maybe it's time to learn the lessons of years of diplomatic failure and adopt a new Iran strategy.

A missile on parade in Tehran, September 2013

NEWSCOM

The chances of achieving an acceptable deal with Iran were always remote. It was always unlikely that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei would accept anything short of complete American capitulation, given that hostility to the Great Satan is central to his regime's raison d'être. Still, diplomacy was perhaps worth pursuing up to a point. The United States had a strong hand to play—a vast network of regional military assets and allies, some ability to cripple Iran economically, and the capability to destroy Iran's nuclear infrastructure, if it came to that. Iran, meanwhile, has a strong terror network and a growing missile force, but an unimpressive military, few regional allies, and many powerful foes, while being dependent upon energy exports to support its economy and rule of terror.

When President Obama began his diplomatic efforts, he pledged his readiness "to use all elements of American power to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon." But he then spent years undermining the credibility of this pledge, and thus undermining what leverage the United States had with Iran. He unilaterally and voluntarily turned a reasonably strong hand into a weak one.

Obama seemed to believe the key to resolving differences with Tehran was to allay Iranian suspicions. So in 2009 he wrote a letter to Khamenei. That same year he failed to support the antiregime demonstrators who rose up following Iran's fraudulent presidential elections. By 2014, Obama was still sending letters to Khamenei, pleading that Iran work with Washington. These entreaties were ridiculed by Tehran and interpreted as supplications from a weak and declining power.

Similarly, Obama failed to confront Iran or its allies in the region. Especially noteworthy was his refusal to support moderate Syrians in their uprising against Bashar al-Assad or to do anything subsequently to undermine Assad's rule, even after saying in 2011 that the Syrian dictator had to go.

At the same time, Obama distanced himself from Israel and America's traditional Arab allies, all ardent foes of Iran. Senior Obama officials had secret talks with Iran over its nuclear program in Oman without telling the Israelis or the Saudis. And Obama went out of his way to pick public fights with the Israelis and demonstrated a general lack of concern for the security of Arab allies. All of this emboldened Iran in its dreams of regional hegemony.

Furthermore, the Obama administration often didn't seem serious about its claim that it was committed to preventing a nuclear Iran, raising suspicions that its true policy was one of containment. In 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton suggested consideration of a regional "nuclear umbrella," implying the United States was prepared to live with a nuclear Iran. Even when administration officials spoke about prevention, they spoke only of stopping Iran from achieving a nuclear "weapon," instead of nuclear "capability."

Meanwhile, Congress did force the imposition of tough sanctions, causing Iran's oil exports to plunge and its economy to contract. Sanctions may have brought Iran to the negotiating table, but they have failed in their main purpose: stopping the nuclear program. And when President Obama foolishly relaxed the sanctions regime in January 2014, U.S. leverage virtually disappeared.

Throughout, though, the main element missing from the American strategy has been a credible military option.

Congress could have helped by holding hearings on the viability of a military strike, which would have signaled seriousness and resolve. But military action is primarily the realm of the president. Obama has implicitly taken it off the table, at least in the minds of Iran's leaders, through his policies on defense spending, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, where he failed to enforce his 2013 red line against Assad's use of chemical weapons. Moreover, U.S. officials often disparaged Israel's military option, most recently when an anonymous senior administration official gloated it was now "too late" for Israel to strike Iran.

It's time for a new strategy that is more comprehensive and robust. President Obama unfortunately hasn't learned from his mistakes, so Congress will have to take the lead. Congress could immediately pass new and stronger sanctions legislation, which would seek to cut off all of Iran's oil sales, a manageable prospect given the current global supply glut and the drop in oil prices of about 30 percent since the summer. Congress could pass an Authorization for the Use of Military Force against Iran, to at least make clear it will support the president if he acts. Congress could augment Israel's capacity to strike Iran's nuclear facilities by passing legislation that would sell Israel 30,000-pound Massive Ordinance Penetrators (MOPs)—bunker-busters that can penetrate 200 feet below ground—as well as spare B-52s, currently unused by the U.S. Air Force, to deliver them. This would boost our leverage with Iran, send a strong signal of support for Israel, and improve the chances for a successful Israeli strike if that proves necessary.

We wish that President Obama would reverse course. But wishes are no basis for policy. Congress has repeatedly stated its commitment to preventing a nuclear Iran. It is time for Congress, as best it can, to take the lead in this matter crucial to our national interest. It is time for Congress to speak, and to act, for America.

—Michael Makovsky & William Kristol

Crêpes Suzette or Pie?

So we've done it: wrested control of the Senate from the do-nothing Democrats. But who are "we"? Are we the corporatist conservatives who fret that high marginal tax rates are stifling the risk-taking of wealthy investors, that business taxes are too high, that the entitlement state is unsustainable? Or are "we" the populist conservatives who worry about bank bailouts, dislike bonuses set by buddy-buddy boards, and believe with Adam Smith that workers are entitled to a decent wage and that free trade is fine so long as its beneficiaries, the winners, concede some of their gains to the losers? As Frank Sinatra might have put it: Are we crêpes suzette or pie? Wall Street or pawn shop? Country club or ballpark?

In practical terms, do "we" care more about businesses' desire for lower taxes, free trade regardless of its effect on income distribution, asset-bloating monetary policy, and wage-shrinking immigration policy, or are "we" to have as our first priority the improvement of the living standard of disaffected middle-class voters, many of whom stayed home in the recent elections in despair of casting a vote that might improve their lot? If "we" are to be populist conservatives, what ought "we" be doing?

We could start by concentrating on what Republicans can do in the here and now for great masses of voters—consistent with good, conservative principles. The first would be a tax cut—and not in the marginal rate for upper-income families or for corporations, the historic targets of tax-cutting Republicans. The theory of reducing marginal tax rates is that such cuts encourage job creation and risk-taking. Perhaps, but it is difficult to argue that current returns to businesses provide insufficient cash to fund new projects—just look at the idle cash piled up in corporate coffers—or that the wealthy are being overtaxed (cast an eye over data relating to the recent rise in incomes of the better off). Instead, cut the payroll tax paid by all workers earning less than some agreed level. After all, a stimulus to private consumption by people whose real incomes have been stuck on hold for years just might help conservatives get what they have been asking for—more rapid economic growth.

This reduction in the middle-class tax burden can be financed in part, at least, by ending capital gains treatment of so-called carried interest, compensation received by hedge fund and private equity fund managers that almost no expert is prepared to defend as other than ordinary income. If such a move needs defense on other than fairness grounds, consider this: What John Maynard Keynes called the "propensity to consume" is surely higher for the recipients of the tax cuts than for the financial-types who would experience a tiny drop in their total incomes, meaning that total consumer spending might rise, not a bad thing in a growth-hungry economy. Only "might," but we've tried just about everything else to break out of the slow-growth mode, with some but not a great deal of effect.

The danger is that the hedge fund losers will find other ways to take advantage of the convoluted tax code. After all, as Victor Fleischer of the University of San Diego points out, the top 25 hedge fund managers have five times the income of "all the federal, state and local tax examiners, collectors and revenue agents in the United States, combined." They can deploy those funds to find ways of protecting their

after-tax incomes, and for good measure deduct that spending from their taxable income. So if the take from the hedge fund managers proves insufficient to finance a middle-class tax cut, why not borrow the odd billion? Interest rates are low, and far better to borrow to fund a tax cut than to finance a government-led infrastructure program.

That may begin to boost the incomes of the middle class. Then for the next act, do its members a really big favor: Make their television viewing way, way cheaper. No, not by making Internet providers public utilities like electric and gas companies—anyone remember the last major innovation by his local utility? Instead, require cable companies to offer à la carte service, allowing you to pay only for those channels you want to watch, rather than be forced to buy a bundle of stuff, most of which many viewers don't want. This might cost some sports fans more for their favorite channels, but they would save on those they will never watch. Conservatives generally want consumers to have access to products without having them bundled by quasi-monopoly suppliers with things they don't want. Microsoft was not allowed to bundle its browser with its operating system, a longstanding antitrust policy. Surely sauce for the Microsoft goose is sauce for the cable-company gander.

The third bill to be laid on the president's desk could be called the "If You Like Your Doctor Act." Let detailed, hard-to-explain reforms and alternatives to Obamacare wait. Pass a one-item bill, allowing insurance companies to market policies that do not meet Obamacare standards and that allow people to keep their doctors. Unfettered consumer choice has always been considered by market-oriented conservatives to be a good thing. Anyone who has been forced to buy an Obamacare-standards policy, containing features for which he has no need and that required him to give up his doctor, should be allowed to trade it in for one that redeems the president's promise that if you like your doctor . . . you know the rest. Veto that, Barack Obama.

There's more. The multiple weapons of committee chairmen can be used to smite the administration hip and thigh, and restore a modicum of responsibility for everything from Hillary Clinton's failures at Benghazi to the president's failure to keep the IRS from adopting his hyper-partisan approach to policy-making and implementation.

But it is most important to establish the new Republican majority as a populist variant of conservatism rather than a corporatist variant, a conservatism concerned with improving the lives of what elitists call "ordinary people" and Adam Smith called "the great body of the people," thereby creating a receptive atmosphere for whatever more sophisticated conservative reformers propose in the next two years and during the 2016 campaign.

—Irwin M. Stelzer

May Your Holiday Shopping Be Merry and ... Safe

By Thomas J. Donohue
President and CEO
U.S. Chamber of Commerce

The holiday shopping season is now in full swing. On Black Friday, countless Americans ventured out into shopping malls and retail stores in search of the perfect gift or a great deal. Millions more will continue their shopping online today, participating in what has officially been dubbed Cyber Monday.

Many consumers anticipate with excitement the moment a loved one opens up a carefully selected gift. But what if that gift winds up being a knockoff, a pirated copy, or worse, an unsafe and illicit replica of the true product? The reality is that the surge in holiday gift-giving brings a surge in counterfeit activity that targets and can harm consumers.

According to the U.S. Chamber's Global Brand Council, one in three consumers has been tricked into buying low-quality imposter products online. The results of a dubious purchase can range from disappointing to downright dangerous.

A common way consumers are duped is through knockoff luxury goods. Skilled counterfeiters can pass off fakes as the real deal, ripping off both consumers and designers. For shoppers to be certain that they are getting authentic products, they should carefully study labels and packaging and stick with reputable retailers and businesses. If it seems too good to be true, it probably is.

A potentially deadly form of fraud is counterfeit toys. Many parents will search high and low for the popular new toy that is flying off the shelves, and it can be tempting to purchase any one you can get your hands on—no matter the source. But selling counterfeit toys is a booming market, and criminals are putting products into the hands of children that are often made of hazardous materials and faulty parts. Parents should use their best judgment when shopping online for toys and rely on trusted brands and websites.

High-tech products are hot items during the holidays, and consumers should be careful when shopping for cutting-edge software at bargain-basement prices. They could end up costing more in the long run. Counterfeit and pirated software can crash computers, wipe out data, erase files, or even compromise individuals' identities. Consumers should vigorously scrutinize their online software purchases.

The U.S. Chamber Global Intellectual Property Center and its Global Brand Council are committed to keeping consumers safe year-round by advocating for strong intellectual property protections and enforcement. They are vital to preventing consumers from being ripped off or even harmed, and essential to the innovation that keeps our economy strong and improves our lives.

But the very best way to put counterfeiters and criminals out of business is to not buy what they're selling—so shop smart and safe this holiday season.

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Extending Extensions

The 'complex' negotiations with Iran.

BY REUEL MARC GERECHT

Oh, the complexity: Foreign Minister Zarif of Iran and Baroness Ashton of the European Union with John Kerry, November 24

NEWSCOM

Predictably, President Barack Obama and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei have decided to extend again the Joint Plan of Action, the interim nuclear deal they concluded in November 2013. Unlike the last extension, which was for four months, this one is for seven months; the "political" parts of the deal, Secretary of State John Kerry assures us, should be done by March, while further "technical and drafting" details may take until July.

This is an odd situation: Obama agreed to the first, shorter extension last July, when little progress on the big issues had been made. Yet after 10 rounds of negotiations and numerous side meetings, in which, per Secretary Kerry, "progress was indeed made on some of the most vexing challenges that we face," we now need a longer extension? This is necessary, the secretary suggests, because the great progress made is just so "complex" that it requires, as he put it, an "incredible amount of rigorous technical analysis of concepts."

Let us suggest a different narrative. More time is required for more complex negotiations because the Obama administration continues to make concessions to the Iranians that it attempts to justify with technical alchemy. Let us look at centrifuges, perhaps the hardest "technical" issue.

It really wouldn't require long, rigorous negotiations if the American position were still the position the Obama administration inherited from the U.N. Security Council when it came into office: no enrichment of uranium. If Tehran could not maintain a single cascade of centrifuges to produce fissile material in bomb-grade quantity or stockpile enriched uranium, either as a gas or a reversible solid oxide, sufficient for a single nuclear weapon, matters would be relatively clear.

Constraining uranium enrichment becomes more complex when Washington starts conceding to the clerical regime thousands of centrifuges and a larger uranium stockpile. When Khamenei declines our offers—which it appears he's done repeatedly since November 2013—President Obama's response has been to allow Iran more centrifuges or SWUs (measures of uranium enrichment). Both Western and Iranian media report a current American benchmark of around 4,500 machines; Revolutionary Guard-affiliated media have mentioned 6,000 centrifuges.

The recently leaked American plan to leave several thousand centrifuges spinning but disconnect the piping for most of the cascades at the Natanz enrichment sites and mothball these "excess" centrifuges was a pristine example of American technicians and diplomats trying to work around the supreme leader's literalism. Since Khamenei had declared that not a single machine could be dismantled, then why not aim at the piping that makes a cascade? Such a plan could, of course, easily become a minefield of technical abuse. With the nuclear infrastructure of Natanz essentially intact, Iranian engineers could rapidly reconnect newer, much more efficient machines, thus presenting the United States with a shorter break-out time for a bomb.

Iranian press reports suggest that the piping proposal (fortunately) didn't pass muster. It appears the supreme leader, who when it comes to all things American is neither curious nor forbearing, wasn't sufficiently impressed. We hadn't conceded enough. It's a good guess that however many centrifuges we'd conceded as of November 24, the old deadline, the number will be increased in the next seven months, further complicating the challenge of devising a way to give Khamenei what he wants

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while maintaining a modicum of American integrity.

And what's so complex and time-consuming about the heavy-water reactor at Arak? If it is converted to a light-water reactor, as the United States and Europe have requested, the extraction of plutonium becomes a very difficult task (though inspectors would still have to monitor closely the extremely hot, but extractable, spent fuel). Arak only becomes diplomatically complex and time-consuming when the Iranians refuse to accept this downgrade, thereby preserving the possibility of more easily producing a weapon. The plutonium path to an A-bomb has probably been a secondary concern for Iranian nuclear engineers since the clandestine facility was revealed in 2002, as a plutonium break-out is difficult to conceal. And yet the Iranians have proven decidedly obstreperous on Arak.

And is Fordow difficult to solve? Buried beneath a mountain, this site was clandestine until 2009. The president once insisted that it be shut down. Apparently, no longer. As a centrifuge research and development facility, Fordow is likely to become for inspectors a cavernous tarpit, where the Iranians constantly push the envelope of what is allowed and what is stoppable under any nuclear deal. The recent incident at the Natanz Pilot Fuel Enrichment Plant, when the Iranians loaded an advanced IR-5 centrifuge with uranium hexafluoride gas—almost certainly a violation of the Joint Plan of Action—was a small foretaste of what is coming. (Note: The administration has intentionally made it very difficult for Congress to review the classified annexes to the Joint Plan of Action, so it is challenging to know what is, and is not, a violation.) The U.N.'s International Atomic Energy Agency discovered the action and lodged a protest, and the Iranians backed off. Secretary Kerry and his minions, by contrast, doggedly maintain that Tehran hasn't violated the interim accord, while it's pretty clear that it did. This is to be expected. The requisite sanctity and momentum of the process encourage good men to fib.

In all probability, Ali Akbar Salehi, the MIT-educated chief of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, who is close to the supreme leader, meant to test the IAEA and the West. The IAEA passed; Washington failed. It's quite likely that Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, under whose amiable spell Secretary Kerry and the other American principals have all fallen, knew nothing of Salehi's activities. For cause: Zarif, who has no power in the Iranian political system beyond what the supreme leader gives him, is irrelevant to, and probably mostly ignorant of, his country's nuclear-weapons program. The IR-5 incident, like the recent illicit installation of an advanced IR-8 centrifuge, suggests Fordow's future as an R&D site. Secretary Kerry is right to underscore the "complexity" of his diplomacy: He is birthing a nightmare.

And we haven't even gotten to the Additional Protocol Plus, an inspections regime derived from the Non-Proliferation Treaty and IAEA practice that would allow IAEA inspectors to go anywhere, anytime without negotiating access with the clerical regime. Without such monitoring authority, any agreement isn't worth its weight in wood pulp. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps oversees the nuclear program. It has been the primary organization responsible for concealing nuclear-weapons research since the 1980s. Salehi's Atomic Energy Organization deserves honorable mention for its mendacity, especially with IAEA inspectors, who are often on precarious ground when they are inside Iran trying to ferret out the truth. But it's the Corps that physically controls the sites. Parchin, where the IAEA and Western intelligence services are pretty sure that Tehran has experimented with nuclear triggers, is a Revolutionary Guard Corps base. Iran's ballistic-missile programs are also under the control of the guards. The administration has already agreed not to bring up intercontinental ballistic-missile research and development in the nuclear negotiations, instead making the development of nuclear warheads its primary concern. The lead nuclear negotiator, Wendy Sherman, hasn't yet explained how Washington can verify that Iran isn't developing a nuclear warhead—and no country has ever experimented with ICBMs and not developed an atomic warhead to put on them—without access to Revolutionary Guard sites, ballistic-missile engineers, and the piles of paperwork behind these projects. She should.

Olli Heinonen, the former number two at the IAEA and now at Harvard, is convinced Iran has illicitly imported enough carbon fiber to manufacture 5,000 advanced IR-2 centrifuges, more than enough for a rapid, clandestine nuclear "sneak-out." The IAEA doesn't know where this carbon fiber is; the regime refuses to reveal verifiably its location and use. Without an Additional Protocol Plus married to full disclosure by Tehran of its research and development into the militarization of its nuclear work (the IAEA calls this the "PMDs," or "possible military dimensions," of the atomic program), the United States is simply incapable of ascertaining whether and how Tehran may be cheating. Yet Iran's former foreign minister and current adviser to the supreme leader, Ali Velayati, and the deputy to foreign minister Zarif in the nuclear negotiations, Abbas Araghchi, have both made it crystal clear that Iran will not allow anytime, anywhere inspections. Needless to say, since Khamenei has said that the Islamic Republic isn't developing a nuclear weapon, he's unlikely to say now, "Oops, I forgot."

All of this Iranian negativity, of course, makes the nuclear negotiations more "complex," requiring considerable American ingenuity to explain how it's possible to verify Iranian compliance. This is why the former director of the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency, General Michael Hayden, is on record that he could not, if he were still in office, verify the intelligence integrity of a final agreement unless an Additional Protocol Plus

and PMDs were included. The Iranians' refusal to countenance effective verification all by itself would, if the administration were serious, collapse these talks.

Secretary Kerry offered an ingenious solution to this conundrum in his Vienna press conference: "We're not telling." The administration is attempting to maintain total secrecy about what has transpired in the negotiations, claiming that such secrecy is absolutely essential to the success of its diplomacy.

But how exactly is this true? On the Iranian side, the supreme leader and senior commanders of the Revolutionary Guards know all. They hold Zarif's leash. They, and they alone, determine the red lines. For them there are no nuclear surprises, no compromises that need to be hidden from a hostile, veto-rendering parliament. Secrecy in these negotiations is intended to hobble only one party: Congress.

And Congress so far has taken it. Hardly a word came out of the institution when the White House established CIA-like ground rules for the perusal of the Joint Plan of Action, which prohibit congressmen from having their own copies of the classified annexes, where the juicy details are buried. This may change when the Republicans assume control of both houses in January. It should. A thorough public debate can only help clarify the good and the bad of what has transpired.

It's pretty clear now that the administration would like to extend the interim accord to the end of Obama's presidency—if it can figure out a way to do so. So let us publicly, on the floors of Congress, debate whether that's a good idea. No matter what happens, a united American front is surely preferable tactically for dealing with Tehran. The Iranians have been adamant throughout the talks that they want sanctions lifted quickly. The president has so far wisely resisted these demands, knowing full well that sanctions are the only real leverage he has. The president may fear that, if he denies Congress a say on one of the most important national-security questions confronting the country, he won't hold the Democrats necessary to override a veto. His discretionary authority to waive sanctions in these negotiations might get clipped. An ugly Iran debate could actually break what's left of the president's reputation and power overseas. If the president can win on the Hill, however, he and the country will be a lot better off.

President Hassan Rouhani, in whose "moderation" the administration has placed all its hopes, does offer a way out. In his nuclear memoirs and in his many speeches defending his time as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator between 2003 and 2005, Rouhani tells us clearly that the Western threat of sanctions and the Iranian fear of war with the United States spooked Tehran, rendering the clerical regime amenable to negotiations and a pause in its push for nuclear weapons. Congress and the president need to follow Rouhani's advice. Increase the pressure. Don't be scared of Ali Khamenei. We still hold the high ground. Use it—or lose it. Iranian research and development continue to advance. ♦

She's Back

Jesus' wife—again.

BY CHARLOTTE ALLEN

The Jesus-Mary Magdalene Wedding-Industrial Complex is at it again. The latest effort to get Jesus hitched to his most famous female disciple comes from maverick Israeli-Canadian filmmaker Simcha Jacobovici and maverick Canadian biblical scholar Barrie Wilson, in their already-bestselling new book, *The Lost Gospel: Decoding the Ancient Text that Reveals Jesus' Marriage to Mary the Magdalene*.

The Jacobovici-Wilson book, released to press fanfare on November 12, follows hard on the heels of Harvard Divinity School professor Karen L. King's revelation in 2012 of a scrap of ancient-looking papyrus bearing the words "and Jesus said to them, 'my wife.'" King argued that the "wife," although not named in the fragment, was probably Mary Magdalene. Journalists, academics, and clergypeople alike went all aflutter for months speculating whether Dan Brown's blockbuster 2003 novel *The Da Vinci Code*—which also unites Jesus and the Magdalene in wedlock—could have a grain of truth to it, and what it would mean for the future of Christianity had its founder, traditionally regarded as celibate, turned out to be not so.

Early in 2014 the results of carbon-dating tests revealed that the piece of papyrus wasn't so old as King had thought (it dated from the 8th century, nowhere near the time of Jesus), and many scholars concluded that King had been duped by a modern forger who had copied some words from another ancient text onto the tiny fragment. King herself, while continuing to maintain that the writing was genuine, withdrew her assertion that it referred specifically to Mary Magdalene.

But at least King's papyrus scrap did use the words "Jesus" and "wife" in the same sentence. *The Lost Gospel* is a far more ambitious attempt to cater to people's willingness to believe what they want to believe—because the supposed "lost gospel" that Jacobovici and Wilson say they have uncovered never actually mentions Jesus at all. Nor Mary Magdalene. Furthermore, as Robert Cargill, a professor of classics

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and religious studies at the University of Iowa put it in a scathing online review, "Mr. Jacobovici's *The Lost Gospel* is neither 'lost' nor a 'gospel.'"

Instead, it is a well-known ancient text that scholars call "Joseph and Aseneth" because its two leading characters are the biblical patriarch Joseph and his bride Aseneth, briefly mentioned in the Book of Genesis as the daughter of an Egyptian priest and the mother of Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. "Joseph and Aseneth" elaborates on their courtship and wedding, which includes the pagan Aseneth's conversion to belief in the God of Israel. No one knows exactly when "Joseph and Aseneth" was written—perhaps as early as the first century B.C. or as late as the second century A.D. Most scholars believe that it's a Jewish text, written to explain how it happened that a pious Hebrew patriarch married a pagan woman. But some scholars think the romantic tale has Christian overtones, including references to bread and wine that might be allegories of the Christian Eucharist. Manuscripts of "Joseph and Aseneth," believed to have been originally composed in Greek, have been surfacing since the 19th century. The version that Jacobovici and Wilson claim to have unearthed, a 6th-century manuscript written in Syriac, a Middle Eastern dialect related to the Aramaic that Jesus probably spoke, has been on the shelves of the British Library since 1847 ("gathering dust" is the way the two put it, although that manuscript has in fact been extensively studied).

No matter. Jacobovici and Wilson claim to have "decoded" the manuscript by substituting "Jesus" for "Joseph" and "Mary Magdalene" for "Aseneth." "There is now written evidence that Jesus was married to Mary the Magdalene and that they had children together," they write. During "the missing years of Jesus' life" before he began his public ministry, "he became engaged, got married, had sexual relations, and produced children," Jacobovici and Wilson say.

Some of the 544-page *Lost Gospel* consists of an English translation of the Syriac text by Tony Burke, a colleague of Wilson's teaching biblical studies at York University in Toronto, but Jacobovici and Wilson devote the bulk of it to interpreting what they insist that text actually says. Some of those interpretations are bizarre indeed. For example, "encrypted" in the Aseneth story is a plot by the Roman emperor Tiberius' adopted son, Germanicus, to assassinate Jesus and his two sons, they say. They interpret references to "blood" in the Aseneth story as allusions to Mary Magdalene's menstrual periods—much in the way that Dan Brown decided in *The Da Vinci Code* that the Holy Grail of medieval legend was actually Mary Magdalene's vagina. Jacobovici and Wilson argue that "Joseph and Aseneth" was originally written during the first century by a group of dissident Christians—in code, because the mainstream Christians of ancient times wanted to eradicate memories of Mary Magdalene's high status in the early church as Jesus' wife.

Not now, dear: 'Christ's Appearance to Mary Magdalene after the Resurrection,' by Alexander Ivanov

Neither Wilson nor Jacobovici responded to requests for interviews. Wilson is best known for his 2009 book *How Jesus Became Christian*, which repackages the oft-told narrative that Bad Cop Paul of Tarsus invented the Christian religion by hijacking the teachings of Good Cop Jesus of Nazareth, who wanted nothing more than to be a Jewish rabbi. Jacobovici is a more flamboyant figure, known for his archaeological documentaries, typically aired by the History Channel and the Discovery Channel, that retail sensationalistic theories that mainstream archaeologists deem dubious.

Jacobovici's *The Exodus Decoded* (2006), produced by James Cameron (*Titanic*, *Avatar*), claimed to have located the Ark of the Covenant, among other artifacts. Another Jacobovici documentary, *The Lost Tomb of Jesus* (2007), asserted that a collection of ancient ossuaries, or bone-boxes, found in Jerusalem once contained the bones of Jesus and various members of his family, including a son and a "Mary" who Jacobovici argued was the Magdalene. Jacobovici's *The Nails of the Cross* (2011) claimed to have located Jesus' crucifixion nails—or at least something close. His *The Jesus Discovery* (2012) argued that squiggles on yet another Jerusalem ossuary spelled out the story of Jonah and the whale, which early Christians regarded as a prefiguring of Jesus' resurrection. Jacobovici deemed the first-century ossuary to be the "earliest Christian artifact," but most New Testament scholars were unable to see much more than decorative lines on the bone-box.

Even the Church of England, not known for its hostility toward adventurous theories about Christian origins, has condemned Jacobovici's latest Jesus-and-Mary Magdalene venture as more fiction than fact. Yet *The Lost Gospel* is already No. 2 on Amazon's ancient history list, only a week after its release. There seems to be an insatiable public appetite these days for theories about a match between Jesus and the female disciple who was so close to him that John's Gospel describes her as the first person to

encounter Jesus after his resurrection.

Part of the reason is that "Mary Magdalene became sexualized from early on," Anthony Le Donne, a New Testament professor at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, said in a telephone interview. Le Donne is the author of *The Wife of Jesus: Ancient Texts and Modern Scandals* (2013), a book that explores what the search for the historical Jesus' wife tells us about our own culture. Early Gnostic texts seemed to identify the Magdalene as Jesus' lover. Later, as Le Donne pointed out, church fathers in the West identified her with a repentant female "sinner"—perhaps a prostitute—in Luke's Gospel who washes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. Mary Magdalene the long-haired prostitute soon found her way into Christian art and Christian devotion. "She's a follower of Jesus who's not attached to any male, such as a husband or son, so she's always been intriguing," Le Donne said.

Mary's vampish identity persisted in popular culture until nearly the end of the 20th century, in such films as Cecil B. DeMille's *The King of Kings* (1927), *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973), and *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). Then—along came *The Da Vinci Code*, with its narrative that Mary Magdalene, as Jesus' spouse, had been a powerful woman leader whose story and very identity had been ruthlessly suppressed by the men who dominated the early church. This is the same narrative that Wilson and Jacobovici present in *The Lost Gospel*.

"Nearly all the interest in Jesus' wife is post-*Da Vinci Code*," said Mark Goodacre, a New Testament professor at Duke University who maintains a website on "Joseph and Aseneth." "Most people love conspiracies, and Jesus' wife is one of them. It's anticlerical, it's about the hundreds of gospels people think were banned from the Bible, it has the nasty old church suppressing alternative forms of Christianity, and it has sex and romance. It has everything." ♦

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The Bitter End

Mary Landrieu's last stand.

BY QUIN HILLYER

Atchafalaya Basin, La.

Louisiana's Mary Landrieu is flailing in the political current. The three-term Democratic senator is a Hubert Humphrey liberal masked as a John Breaux left-centrist, submerged in a national party that's now left of George McGovern, in a state where political winds are blowing starboard.

And she's anchored by weight of her own choosing. Landrieu didn't have to ignore opinion polls and vote for Obamacare, but she did. She didn't have to vote for radical Obama nominees like Debo Adegbile, pro bono legal advocate for cop killer Mumia Abu-Jamal, but she did. It was her own choice to vote against repealing the medical device tax and to vote increasingly pro-abortion in a pro-life state. She started her Senate career somewhat left of her Louisiana mentors Breaux and Bennett Johnston, and moved even further left. Breaux's lifetime American Conservative Union rating was 45, Johnston's 41; Landrieu's is 20.

It's no wonder Landrieu is all but written off for reelection. No candidate won a majority in Louisiana's nonpartisan primary held Election Day, so the two top candidates face

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a runoff December 6. Polls show Republican Bill Cassidy, a doctor and three-term congressman, with a double-digit lead.

But Landrieu still fights—hard. Even on Election Day, addressing a media scrum after casting her own vote, she ripped into Cassidy: for his votes on disaster relief, for refusing to debate enough, for opposing "equal pay." Despite a relentlessly negative campaign—which has drawn copious criticism from local and national press—the Landrieu effort maintains an energy that, in the Louisiana political tradition, has an appealingly entertaining vibe. That energy emanates from Landrieu herself, who for 35 years of public life has tried to outwork everybody around her. Now, stitching together a biracial conglomeration of mini-coalitions in every working-class small town, her campaign might be the nation's last of its kind: old-style Southern populism, with a dusting of Cajun spice.

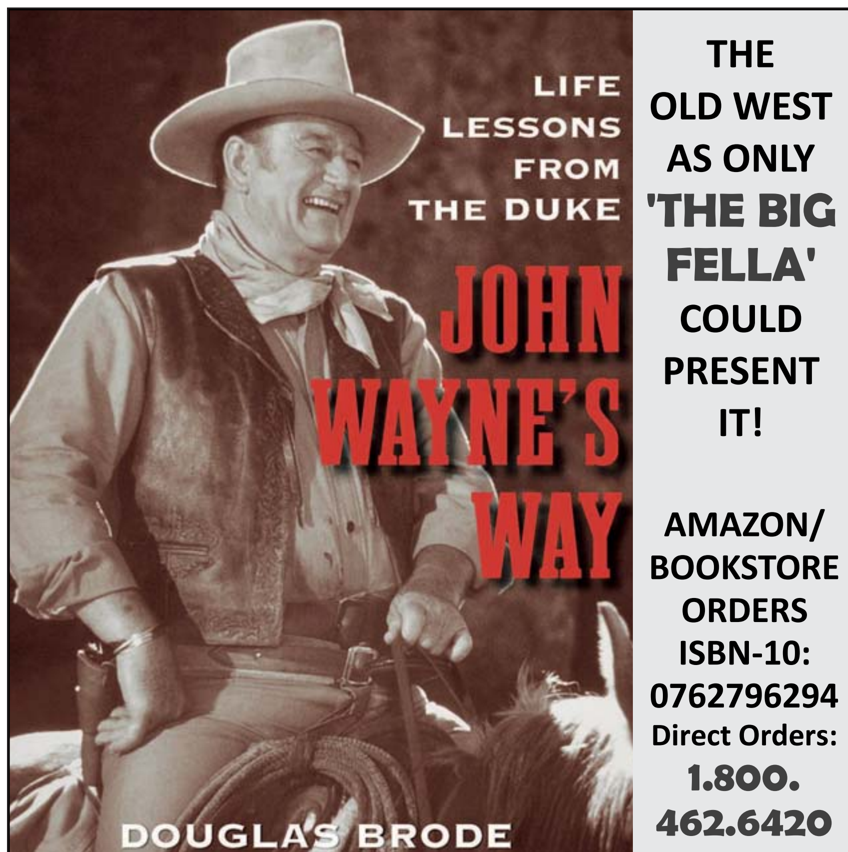
Two weeks before the runoff, Mary's brother Mitch, mayor of New Orleans, traveled three hours west, across the Atchafalaya Basin's miles of marshland, to the town of New Iberia. The mayor is his sister's best advocate, casually engaging and remarkably persuasive.

"My sister is the oldest of 11 children," he says, "all born within 11 years. That's why she's so bossy." (The audience, 50 luncheon guests of the local Democratic party, laughs appreciatively.) "But she's always shown a serious streak of independence. It allows her to serve with great distinction." He continues with a tally. "Our coast is disappearing at 100 yards every 45 minutes, and Mary took up the fight. She made sure Louisiana got its fair share from offshore oil and gas," he says. "Mary is 100 percent for Louisiana, all the time. . . . She got money for Barksdale Air Force Base. She got money for Fort Polk. She got money for Interstate 49. She went to battle for us again and again."

He builds a compelling case for his sister with an infectiously upbeat demeanor. His defense of Obamacare is deeply personal but not maudlin: Nineteen years ago, doctors found a malignant, three-pound tumor in the stomach of the mayor's daughter Emily, then 6. All the usual, horrendous treatments followed; Emily survived and is now a successful executive of some sort. Without Obamacare forcing coverage of preexisting conditions, her father says, she would probably be ineligible today for health insurance.

Cassidy provides the flip side to that argument the next day, back across the marsh and the Mississippi, in the town of Gonzales, a half-hour south of Baton Rouge and best known for its Jambalaya Festival. Cassidy is focused, disciplined, clinical—about as far from Louisiana's populist tradition as can be imagined. Asked before the rally for some favorite anecdotes from the campaign trail, he comes up with nothing folksy. Instead, he says, "I've been struck that Obamacare has been the principal issue. In Jefferson Parish, a 54-year-old woman who had had a hysterectomy, had no children, is being forced to pay $1,500 per month for a plan covering things she doesn't want. She asks me why she would ever need obstetric care or pediatric dentistry. Then there was a guy in Hammond, mid-50s, boys 18 or 19 years old. Two years ago his family paid $12,000 a year for insurance; last year it rose to $21,000, and this year they're told it will be another 20 percent increase." He concludes: "If people are not getting a subsidy, they are getting pounded."

But this is Louisiana; there can't be politics without flavor. The rally, featuring Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal and senator David Vitter, along with Florida senator Marco Rubio, is at a huge expo center. Cassidy's pavilion contains dozens of (empty) livestock stalls; in the next pavilion is a gun show. From another pavilion, an announcer calls dancers, musicians, and "girls who want to play a princess" to take the stage, and a sound akin to that of war



drums erupts just as the Cassidy rally, 200-strong, begins.

It's Vitter who captures the strange juxtaposition: "On one side, there's a gun show. On the other, there's an Indian powwow. America is a great place, isn't it?"

When Cassidy finally speaks, he spots a supporter named Eddie Lambert in the crowd. Cassidy says that when he mentioned the rally, Lambert said, "Man, I'll be duck hunting that day. But I'll tell you what: I'll get my limit before noon, and I'll be sure to show up."

This is a real concern: Sportsmen are seen as a largely Republican constituency, and the runoff takes place on Louisiana's last duck-hunting weekend and the first day of deer hunting. Cassidy's campaign must keep hunters from assuming they don't need to vote because his victory is "in the bag."

As Cassidy's rally ends that afternoon, the Landrieu campaign is just getting started in Opelousas, back across the Atchafalaya. Landrieu herself isn't there—she's campaigning in Shreveport—but New Jersey senator Cory Booker is wrapping up a tour of Cajun country for his Democratic colleague. One might wonder why a Louisiana senator would host a serial fabulist from New Jersey, but Booker has charisma, which serves the goal of a dozen Landrieu events statewide this day: galvanizing Democratic constituencies, often black, for the first day of early voting.

Booker's caravan is an hour behind schedule, but the crowd of about 250, 90 percent black, hasn't minded at all. A five-piece ensemble called the Soul Express Brass Band was on the floor blowing sounds you might hear on a New Orleans street; 15 minutes later, the Keith Frank and the Soileau Zydeco Band is on stage raising the roof, while several couples dance spontaneous two-steps.

Booker doesn't speak long because time's running out to bus people to the polls for that day's early voting. But his energy is palpable, and the crowd loves it when he says: "This state can tell all those Obama haters that we are motivators. Let it be a referendum on the president, because we support the president."

But most of Louisiana emphatically does not—and Cassidy has made sure every sentient being in the state knows that Landrieu has voted with Obama 97 percent of the time.

Landrieu also suffers from population migrations brought by Hurricane Katrina. It's not that the black Democratic base in Louisiana is smaller—it isn't—but that it's much harder, at least in New Orleans, to get out the vote. Katrina's temporary displacement of communities citywide helped undermine the power of a spate of previously super-strong black political organizations known by the acronyms SOUL, BOLD, COUP, and LIFE, along with the progressive Democrats of the now-imprisoned former representative William "Cold Cash" Jefferson. More permanently, the Lower Ninth Ward, whose relatively concentrated population was easy to round up by bus in past elections, was wiped out by the storm and remains, nine years later, the scene of scattered, lovingly tended homes amidst acres of empty lots and ruins.

Top, pre- and post-Katrina homes in New Orleans's Lower 9th Ward; below, Mary Landrieu speaks to workers in Houma, Louisiana, November 25.

NEWSCOM

The numbers are instructive: With boatloads of gambling money turning out liberal voters to support a referendum for a land-based casino in November 1996, Landrieu eked out a 5,788-vote win with the help of 47,213 votes in the Ninth Ward. In her first reelection, in 2002, she got 31,365 votes from the Ninth in the primary. This year, while still earning well over 90 percent of Ninth Ward votes, her total fell to 17,845.

Losing 30,000 votes in just one ward, and nearly 14,000 from the most recent midterm contest, is a tough blow in a tight race.

Bob Mann, a top Breaux aide for 17 years and now a Louisiana State University professor and *Times-Picayune* columnist, says it is "quite remarkable" how badly Democrat fortunes have fallen in just 12 years. "Mary is sort of marooned on an island by herself," he said. "She's a pretty strong swimmer, but the tide is strong against her." ◆

French Curtains

Eric Zemmour's raw attack on France's elites is the talk of Paris

By Christopher Caldwell

French readers follow the herd. They believe in prizes. When a French author wins the Goncourt or the Nobel, people rush to bookstores and send his books rocketing to the top of the bestseller lists. But today the French have other things on their minds. President François Hollande is France's least popular leader since World War II. His poll ratings are even lower than Barack Obama's. A gay marriage law he rushed through the National Assembly in 2013 has continued to bring enraged (and previously apolitical) protesters into the streets in 2014. Hollande's Socialist party lost 150 cities in last spring's municipal elections. In elections for the European parliament, which took place at about the same time, the National Front became France's largest party. The working-class group, long tarred as fascist, took twice as many seats as the Socialists, who fell to third.

Although the French novelist Patrick Modiano won the Nobel in October, he has lately been bumped off the charts by Eric Zemmour, a talk-show pundit who is persona non grata among the country's intellectual establishment. Zemmour's *Le suicide français* (Paris: Albin Michel, 534 pages, 22.90 euros) is made for the moment. It argues that, since the French student uprising of May 1968, women's libbers, Muslim migrants, crooked bankers, and overzealous judges have brought France to ruin. To judge from the reaction to Zemmour's book—which sold a quarter-million copies in the fortnight after publication despite furious condemnations in all of the daily papers—large parts of the French public think he is right.

It is tempting to look at Zemmour as a television hothead in the Bill O'Reilly mold. He is that, at times. But his book has a great ambition, too. As Paul Johnson did in his magisterial *Modern Times* (1983), Zemmour takes a half-century of events that have been shrouded in progressive clichés and places them in a more logical relationship. His method is the one that historian Richard Reeves uses in his biographies of U.S. presidents. Zemmour will take an episode in France's political or cultural life, describe the long train of events that made it possible, and extrapolate to its consequences. These are generally episodes that show the French choosing to do away with something they had formerly cherished: the release of director Bertrand Blier's sexual picaresque *Les valseuses* in 1974; the 1993 law abandoning the list of approved (usually saints') names that had been in force for two centuries; President Jacques Chirac's abolition of military conscription in 1996; the introduction of affirmative action in one of France's elite universities that same year; the booing of the "Marseillaise," the French national anthem, by North African immigrant spectators during a game against Algeria in October 2001, weeks after the attacks on the World Trade Center; the lack of any commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Austerlitz (1805), perhaps the greatest victory of Napoleon, who until that point had been revered almost as a demigod in French popular culture; and so on.

Zemmour's idea of France is built around its great nation-builders: Richelieu, Napoleon, and above all General (later president) Charles de Gaulle. It was de Gaulle who rescued French honor after the country's surrender and occupation in World War II and unified the postwar nation around a narrative of its fight against the Nazis—even if that narrative was mythological, the fight having been in large part confined to Communists, various Christians, and the general himself. De Gaulle's conservatism was different from conservatism elsewhere. He was attached more to the grandeur of the French nation, less to liberty and small government, and he neither admired nor trusted the United States. After his death in 1970, French politicians made their peace with the free market and a less ambitious view of their country's destiny. Its intellectuals came to treat their fathers as a bunch of collaborators. Zemmour now sees the post-de Gaulle consensus as an unpatriotic sellout. "We were taught to love what we used to hate," he writes, "and to hate what we used to love."

The means by which France's institutions were pulled off their hinges will be familiar to Americans. Utopian court decrees had a lot to do with it, but even commonsensical laws could be interpreted in radical ways, leaving French people asking: When did I vote for *that*? Mass immigration, especially from France's hastily abandoned colonies in North Africa and West Africa, looms over this book as the great unintended consequence. It was already transforming France by the time de Gaulle left power. But a seemingly

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straightforward antidiscrimination law of 1972, by introducing "the principle of nondiscrimination between French and foreigners," made it impossible to stop. The law was interpreted in a spirit that led not just to equality but to an outright preference for foreigners. The North African traditional family was treated as essential to the flourishing of its members, so that "family reunification" became grounds for bringing in vast numbers of new residents, once a single family member was working on French soil.

By contrast, with the women's movement in full swing, the French traditional family was treated as an oppressive vestige from which wives and children must be liberated. Zemmour sees feminism as one of the central tragedies of postwar France (even if, to the outsider, there appears to have been less of it there than elsewhere). Feminists had called for "liberated" relations between the sexes. Their ideal was the happy-go-lucky cuckold of Michel Delpech's 1973 song "*Les Divorcés*":

> At first it broke me up inside,
> It was a challenge to my pride
> And I refused to understand.
> But now it doesn't seem so bad
> And in the end I'm really glad
> That you should find another man.

NEWSCOM

Eric Zemmour

But women turned out not to like that kind of man very much, once they had him. Zemmour notes that the ruthless Don Juans of the old macho sexual order had feared two things above all: pregnancy and marriage. "The paradox of feminism," he writes, "was that it fulfilled the dreams of generations of male predators." The result for milder, moderate, and more tradition-minded men was summed up by a comedian of the time, Guy Bedos: "We separated by mutual agreement," Bedos said. "Especially hers."

The son of North African Jewish immigrant parents, Zemmour is sensitive about immigration in both senses of the word "sensitive." That is, he is highly nuanced and easily angered. Even if it was retreating from a large colonial empire, France had no recent legacy of slavery and segregation to atone for, as America did. But it was not lost on the Socialist president François Mitterrand, who came to power in 1981, what a powerful rallying cry and organizing tool the rejection of racism had proven to be in the United States. In 1984 his government helped establish the NGO SOS Racisme to agitate and propagandize. It was a solution in search of a problem, but it was mightily effective in intimidating French journalists and politicians. Thereafter the press covered immigration, Zemmour writes, through anecdotage, discussing "the individual fates of immigrants, their wives, their children, their emotions, their resentments . . . willfully obscuring their collective, historical side, as members of a people that had its own roots, its culture, its religion, its heroes, and its dreams of postcolonial vengeance." Much as feminism was a windfall for macho men, the sort of antiracism that protects the foreign-born from hard questions proved good news for a certain kind of racist. According to the filmmaker Alexandre Arcady, in the public schools of the vast suburban *département* of Seine-St-Denis, once heavily Jewish and now heavily Arab, there is "not a single student of Jewish faith."

Zemmour has addressed the taboo subject of France's relationship to its Jews without the slightest circumspection or hedging. In so doing he has cost himself the good feeling of many readers who might otherwise have backed him. In 1995, French president Jacques Chirac, a Gaullist himself, apologized on behalf of the French nation for a notorious 1942 roundup. Thirteen thousand Paris-area Jews were corralled into a sports arena near the Eiffel Tower and then shipped to Auschwitz. The apology was much applauded by the press two decades ago. Zemmour finds it appalling. He sees it as a renunciation of the central tenet of Gaullism: that the Vichy government that surrendered and collaborated with the Nazis was not France. The real France, *la France éternelle*, was the one led by de Gaulle in London that carried on resisting. Chirac broke with the founding principle of the political movement he had been entrusted with leading. It is consistent with Zemmour's heartfelt Gaullism to deplore this.

Less consistent is Zemmour's reconsideration of Vichy's role in delivering to their deaths tens of thousands of Jews who lived in France. In Zemmour's view, shaped by the work of the rabbi Alain Michel, an argument can be made that the Vichy government saved the lives of its own Jewish citizens by first offering up some of the large number of Jewish refugees who had fled to France from the Nazis. There may be a measure of truth to this—three-quarters of France's Jews survived, whereas almost none did in the Netherlands. But his story is incomplete—Vichy revoked the French citizenship of its most recently naturalized Jewish citizens, exposing them to deportation. Zemmour is never maleficent in writing about such things. But he is sometimes maladroit, especially when he attacks former Socialist prime minister Lionel Jospin for his misgivings about Mitterrand's friendship with one of the organizers of the 1942 roundup, René Bousquet. Jospin's complaints were perfectly reasonable and even courageous, given Mitterrand's mythical status in the Socialist movement at the time. It is de Gaulle's account of World War II, not Vichy's, that Zemmour wants to defend. And he is right that a counterproductive "competition of victims" started as soon as that account was called into question.

Louis Malle's movie *Au revoir, les enfants* (1987) was, he thinks, a key event in the popularization of a national self-hatred that had once been confined to intellectuals.

Zemmour is interested in France's antiracism because he considers it an instrument of class warfare, a sign that the progressive "creative classes" who once idealized the poor now hold them to be contemptible thugs. Zemmour cites Yves Boisset's 1975 film *Dupont Lajoie*, in which a murderer frames a group of saintly Algerians for his own misdeed. One of Zemmour's best sketches is of the French celebrities, led by the lovely actress Emmanuelle Béart, who joined a protest on behalf of the Malian and Mauritanian *sans-papiers* (undocumented immigrants) in the summer of 1996. The migrants were using the church of St-Bernard, in the 18th arrondissement, as a place to orate, eat, sleep, and go to the bathroom. "Not since the days of the Jansenist Convulsionaries," Zemmour writes, "had so many young beauties and high-born men been in a church." He notes, too, that the protesters at the Église St-Bernard, although they did not realize it, were defending their own class's interests against those of the French-born poor. They, the movie stars, use low-wage labor to trim their gardens and fix their gourmet meals—unlike the working classes, who compete against it.

To Zemmour, virtually everything the French government has done since 1983—when the Socialist Mitterrand reversed course and opened up France to more free enterprise and international competition—has wound up selling off some part of the working-class patrimony to benefit the rich. Zemmour sees this as not just an injustice but a mistake. He admires central planning, which he almost always calls *colbertisme*, after the financial adviser of Louis XIV, to mark its deep roots in French culture. Nonetheless, he argues that planning in the 1950s and 1960s worked particularly well—in space, high-speed trains, nuclear power, telecommunications (including Minitel, a proto-Internet), and aeronautics (including the high-speed Concorde, an engineering marvel that was, he says, "assassinated" by U.S. protectionism). He also argues, plausibly, that in our own age of global finance, France's corporations are simply not well enough capitalized to wheel and deal on an equal footing with the private and public pension funds of the United States or the sovereign wealth funds of the resource-exporting nations.

Global competition was a slap in the face to France's pretensions. But those who urged the policy on the country did well out of it. Zemmour's symbol of the age is Louis Schweitzer, who left his job as the chief of staff to Socialist prime minister Laurent Fabius to run Renault. The revolving door—*pantouflage*, as it is called—is an old tradition in France. It mattered less when the head of Renault was paid little more than a top political functionary. But as the years passed, Schweitzer's income rose into the millions, and Renault kept shedding jobs and moving plants overseas.

For two centuries, France has funded the *grandes écoles*, where brilliant youths like Schweitzer were trained at public expense for prestigious government jobs. Suddenly France could no longer keep these people on the payroll. Zemmour writes that France now has 400 elite *inspecteurs de finances*, and all but 60 of them have left to make a killing in the private sector. Worse, time spent as a "public servant" makes such yuppies more valuable to their future employers because it gives them knowledge of the state's regulatory vulnerabilities and loopholes—much as an ex-congressman can be a better lobbyist for his knowledge of the ways in which Congress is corruptible.

Zemmour, a conservative in most things, was won over by the protests in the 1990s of José Bové, the politically savvy maker of Roquefort cheese who led a group that vandalized a McDonald's franchise under construction in Millau, arguing that McDonald's had violated French laws against hormone-treated beef. Most French people sympathized with Bové, seeing him as a commonsensical defender of tradition (Roquefort) against poison (Big Macs). Zemmour faults him only for having retreated from his initial stridency into a comfortable seat in the European parliament.

In the monthly magazine *Causeur*, an outlet for the best intellectuals of the French center-left who have not made their peace with political correctness, editor Élisabeth Lévy told Zemmour during an interview that he seemed to be getting more left-wing. "Obviously," he replied. With historical distance, he now takes a somewhat positive view of postwar French communism. The "Gaullist" system, in which the general appeared, to Western eyes, to have triumphed over the Soviet-backed claimants to rule France, was actually a "Gaullo-Communist" system of checks and balances. Each side had won too much legitimacy holding up its end of the French Resistance for the other side to dislodge it.

Under the Fifth Republic, which de Gaulle started in 1958, there was a modus vivendi, almost a separation of powers. Gaullists held the higher posts of state. Communists held the working-class neighborhoods. The housing developments that immigrants now occupy were built as strongholds for Communist political machines. On the bad side, the Communists kept these neighborhoods under close surveillance. On the good side, they sincerely cared about the interests of the French working class.

Immigration flushed the Communist party out of these areas—and eventually drove its voters towards the National Front. The Communist leader Georges Marchais was the first and last politician to insist that mass immigration of Muslims was damaging not just working-class economic prospects but the very fabric of French life. For this he was pilloried on left and right as a racist. Zemmour's reverence

for Marchais makes his own anti-anti-racism easier to define. It is not racism. It is a belief that France's ruling class uses accusations of racism as a way of discrediting its class enemies, the better to impose on them a capitalism they have no familiarity with and no reason to want.

In 1979 there were riots in the Lyon suburb of Vaulx-en-Velin. Two years later violence erupted in the Minguettes housing development in nearby Vénissieux. "Contrary to popular belief," Zemmour writes, "the riots at Minguettes were not a beginning but an end. An end of the battle fought by the Communists to hold their territory. Vénissieux was the Diên Biên Phu of the Red Belt." In France at least, communism "wound up being a transitional culture between Christianity and Islam."

We are almost at the end of Zemmour's argument. France, he believes, has made two big, and closely related, mistakes over the past generation: It has embraced American-style capitalism, to which its economy and culture are not adapted, and it has accepted more immigration than its institutions can handle. Why does it show no sign of doing anything to reverse these choices? Zemmour's answer is that France is no longer a free and sovereign country. It is trapped in the multinational European Union, with its ever-more-grandiose plans and ever-tightening rules. France has traded away its right to self-rule in the name of economic advantages that are failing to materialize. In one positively giddy chapter Zemmour simply quotes, one after another, the extravagant promises made by prominent (mostly Socialist) politicians on the eve of the 1992 referendum on the Maastricht treaty, under which France agreed to exchange its age-old currency, the franc, for the rickety euro. His list begins with then-minister of health Bernard Kouchner—"Under Maastricht, we'll laugh a lot more"—and ends with then-president of the European Commission Jacques Delors—"The euro will bring peace, prosperity, competitiveness, and a million new jobs for France alone." French unemployment has been in double digits for much of the time since, and September's figures from the Ministry of Labor put the number of jobless at 3.44 million, an all-time high.

But this only pushes the same question back one step: Why doesn't France reclaim its ability to solve its problems by getting out of Europe? In the run-up to the 1979 European elections, Jacques Chirac, under the influence of the indomitable Gaullist foreign policy hawk Marie-France Garaud, issued a blistering "Cochin declaration" (which Zemmour reproduces). Chirac described the eclipse of French greatness that would result if France went any further into Europe. He didn't believe it, though. He won only 16 percent of the vote. Eventually Garaud would tell Chirac: "I used to think you were made of the marble they use for statues—but you were made of the porcelain they use for bidets." Over the decades the French have been unable to resist what the political philosopher Marcel Gauchet has come to call Mitterrand's Lie: "the promise that what we could no longer do in France thanks to socialism, we could do in Europe thanks to Europe."

The reaction to Zemmour's book confirms certain of its theses. Luc Bronner, an editorialist at *Le Monde*, acknowledges that Zemmour has identified real problems, but thinks they are all matters of *stagnation éducative* that can be solved by throwing enough government money at schools. Zemmour has been accused by *Figaro* editor Franz-Olivier Giesbert of "being in total harmony of thought with [National Front leader] Marine Le Pen." Remarks such as Giesbert's used to be a warning of pariah status, but they are losing their bite. In certain recent polls, and now the European elections, the National Front has proved to be France's most popular party—for much the same reason that *Le suicide français* spent several weeks as France's most popular book. The French, having decided they need their sovereignty back, are increasingly willing to ignore their misgivings about the only party that can credibly promise to fight for it. Long-term, France is as good a bet to pull out of the European Union as Britain. That does not mean it is moving to the "right" or embracing "hatred." If the Socialists or the UMP ever made a credible promise to allow their members to vote their conscience on the matter of staying in Europe, they would be able to stop Le Pen in her tracks. But they won't. For some reason they can't.

France's predicament was inherent in its postwar position. De Gaulle himself could not have staved it off forever. Hollande, the hapless president, is just the guy who was left holding the bag. As long as Germany was divided and discredited, unable to use its power unilaterally, it required France as a chaperone. France assumed the diplomatic weight of two midsized countries. That is why it never seemed too small, for instance, for its seat on the U.N. Security Council. But France could behave as a world power only until Germany recovered its unity, got its diplomatic act together, and restored its good name. French power could not survive the dissipation of German war guilt.

Here is the deeper reason why the national self-hatred that Zemmour deplores, the painful revisiting of the crimes of World War II, the creeping feminization of a once-virile political elite, gained such a strong hold on France in the 1970s, '80s, and '90s. Directed outward towards Germany, this revisiting was in France's interests. In fact it was the very wellspring of French power. The expansion of the European Union, mass immigration, and unbridled capitalism did not begin as an attempt to bamboozle the French people. They began with the false assumption that the moral order Europe built in the wake of World War II would last forever. ♦

'Napoleon's Farewell to the Imperial Guard at Fontainebleau' by Antoine-Alphonse Montfort

Comète Française

A British portrait of France's hero. BY DOMINIC GREEN

If a cultured American is one who can hear the *William Tell* Overture without thinking of the Lone Ranger, then an educated Briton is someone who gets the jokes in *1066 and All That*, W.C. Sellar and R.J. Yeatman's 1930 pastiche of patriotic legends and schoolroom clichés. In that loving spoof, history is the struggle of the English to become "top nation." All actors and events are judged Good or Bad.

Napoleon
A Life
by Andrew Roberts
Viking, 976 pp., $45

The Roman Conquest, for example, was "a Good Thing, since the Britons were only natives at that time." George III was "a Bad King," but "to a great extent insane and a Good Man." The French Revolution started out "very interesting and romantic," but turned into a Bad Thing: the executions and purges, the 20 years of war as the French exported their interesting and romantic idea, and the imperial rampage of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Andrew Roberts surely knows his Sellar and Yeatman. He also knows his Gibbon and Churchill. Roberts is a storyteller in the old style, a sweeper of epics and a buckler of the swash. His books include *The Storm of War* (2011), an acclaimed history of the Second World War, and paired biographies like *Churchill and Hitler* (2003) and *Napoleon and Wellington* (2001). Fond of an intellectual punch-up, Roberts has defended

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the Raj and Mrs. Thatcher as Good Things, and argued that Neville Chamberlain's foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, was a Good Man. Here, he attempts the contrarian's equivalent of invading Russia: rehabilitating Napoleon as "the Enlightenment on horseback." This is a little like calling Hitler "modernity in a tank," or FDR "liberalism in a wheelchair." It begs the question: Was it a Good Thing that Napoleon tried to make France Top Nation?

Born in 1769, the driven and intelligent son of a distressed gentleman of Corsica, Napoleon was a professional soldier, but an amateur politician. Educated at a military academy and commissioned as an artillery officer, he was slow to see the potential of the French Revolution, but caught on quickly as it turned into a European war. Britain, Austria, Prussia, and Russia ganged together against revolutionary France, and most of Napoleon's fellow officers were royalists. Napoleon capitalized brilliantly on these opportunities for *gloire*. Winning fame for an artillery action at Toulon, he was a brigadier general by 1793. In 1795, aged 25, he rendered himself indispensable to the revolutionary regime by wafting a "whiff of grapeshot" towards the mob outside the Paris legislature.

After that, Napoleon rose like a rocket, a new technology whose battlefield use the aristocratic Duke of Wellington thought unsporting. He restored his family's fortunes as he ascended the ladder and, as the new commander of the Army of the Interior, married Joséphine de Beauharnais, a planter's daughter from Martinique whose first husband had been guillotined during the Terror. In 1796, Napoleon launched the first modern war. He was expert in logistics, and he was the first commander to use a chief of staff. This professional discipline permitted a different kind of fighting: Rapid, multipronged flanking movements converged in a merciless concentration of force, a head-on collision on his terms. The Austrians surrendered before he took Vienna.

Napoleon glossed his legend for domestic consumption by sending fictionalized "bulletins" to Paris. His men loved him but spoke wryly of "lying like a bulletin." Napoleon believed his own mythology. To emulate Alexander and eviscerate the British Empire, he turned to India. Landing at Alexandria with Egypt's first printing press—stolen from the Vatican—he declared himself a Muslim, then smashed the medieval army of the Mameluks at the Battle of the Pyramids. But another professional, Admiral Lord Nelson, cut Napoleon's supply line at the Battle of the Nile. Napoleon's Indian dream sank with his fleet, and he abandoned his army in the desert.

Still, the French acclaimed him as a hero. Joining the Consulate, the ruling triumvirate, he soon rose to first consul.

SEBASTIAN MEYER / CORBIS

Andrew Roberts

In 1800, the Austrians returned to the field. A lucky victory at Marengo forced the anti-French coalition to the table. The Treaty of Amiens gave Europe two years of peace, but it collapsed when Napoleon excluded Britain, the chief funder of the anti-French coalition, from the European economy. Nelson again thwarted Napoleon's global plans at Trafalgar; but on land, Napoleon smashed the Russians and Austrians at Austerlitz, and the Prussians at Jena.

When asked to name the greatest captain of all time, Wellington replied, "In this age, in past ages, in any age, Napoleon."

Enraptured by his military achievements, and aided by newly published correspondence, Andrew Roberts reconstructs Napoleon's maneuvers in battle, and in bed, in superbly dramatic detail. Roberts also claims that Napoleon "championed, consolidated, codified, and geographically extended" the modern ideas of "meritocracy, equality before the law, property rights, religious toleration, modern secular education, sound finances."

Napoleon replaced Europe's old dynasties and quaint laws with modern bureaucracies and the Napoleonic Code—but the metric system was the decree of an arbitrary dictator. Crowning himself emperor in 1804, Napoleon combined the worst aspects of the ancien régime and the revolution. In France, he censored all opposition, centralized every power, and created a new aristocracy in his image, a "meritocracy" of generals. Abroad, he installed his dim brothers on every empty throne, forced his sisters to marry those kings he had not deposed, and stole everything that was not nailed down.

Napoleon talked about *fraternité* but took *égalité* to mean an equality of submission, and he was thoroughly intolerant of *liberté*. As a lawgiver, he resembled Sellar and Yeatman's Henry II: He "laid down the great Legal Principle that everything is either legal or (preferably) illegal." His ideas on "property rights" included looting the continent's art, collecting over 50,000 jewels, and distributing estates among his cronies. His "sound finances" depended on theft and the tributes of his enemies, and his 39 palaces were the state's sixth-largest expenditure. Roberts praises Napoleon as a "profound thinker" and a "protean multitasker," but the figure he describes resembles a micromanaging narcissist and a vain bully—like the Napoleon of *War and Peace*, who rehearses the heroic pose in a mirror.

As Napoleon's pomp swelled, his talent faltered into thud and blunder. In 1807, the Russians forced a draw in the snows of Eylau. Next, Napoleon bungled the invasion of Spain; Goya recorded the results of this vicious exercise. Fatally, after dumping Joséphine for the daughter of the Austrian emperor in 1812, Napoleon led a half-million

men into Russia. Always free with his soldiers' lives, he cared little as the body count rose: At Austerlitz, 15 percent of the combatants died; at Eylau, 25 percent; at Borodino (where Pierre nearly dies in *War and Peace*), 31 percent; at Waterloo, 45 percent. The Russians refused to surrender, and winter arrived. Disgracefully, Napoleon abandoned his army yet again, fleeing in a sledge. Defeated at Leipzig in 1813, he retreated to Elba, then burst out in time, as Sellar and Yeatman put it, to take part in Waterloo. Imprisoned on St. Helena, he died of cancer in 1821, aged 51.

Napoleon won 53 of his 60 battles, but he lost the political war. As Winston Churchill observed, the "greatest man of action since Caesar" left a sour legacy: His flash of military glory cost between four and six million lives. His "legend of invincibility" resounded to malign effect, encouraging dangerous dreams of *gloire* and Caesarism.

Roberts compares Napoleon's retinue of 60 carriages to a "presidential motorcade," and says that those "other great soldier-statesmen," Washington and Eisenhower, faced similar challenges. To compare the Napoleonic method to "modern" governance, we need only apply the question on the hypothetical bumper sticker—"What Would Napoleon Do?"—to, say, the Obama administration's Middle Eastern problems. Following Napoleon's example, the president would conscript a massive army with promises of booty and glory, declare himself a Muslim, and announce (as Napoleon did at Venice) that he was the second coming of Attila the Hun. If the gambit failed, Obama would flee, and make no effort to repatriate his army; if it succeeded, Obama would distribute the mansions of Tehran among his generals, furnish the White House with loot from the mosques of Damascus, and ennoble John Kerry as the marquis of Boston. Now emperor for life, Obama would install his feckless brother as king of Jordan and divorce Michelle in order to sire a dynasty upon Mrs. Bashar al-Assad. There isn't much "modern" in this scenario.

Andrew Roberts's portrait has the volume and verve of a massed charge, but, like Napoleon, it has some strategic flaws. Sellar and Yeatman hold the line: "The French Revolution caused great loss of life, liberty, fraternity, etc., and was, of course, a Good Thing, since the French were rather degenerate at the time; but Napoleon now invented a new Convention that the French should massacre all the other nations and become top nation, and this, though quite generate, was a Bad Thing." ♦

Outer Borough Tales

Man hands on misery to man in Queens.

BY DAVID SKINNER

We Are Not Ourselves
by Matthew Thomas
Simon & Schuster, 640 pp., $28

On the third page of *We Are Not Ourselves*, it is said that Big Mike lives in an apartment on whose walls the only piece of art is a painting of St. Patrick driving the snakes out of Ireland. If not a friend to the world of fine art, Mike is a great friend to his fellow Irish immigrants in Woodside, Queens. On stools and from behind the bar, he holds forth on matters great and small, helping this one with marital advice and that one with a job. A man's man with an over-the-top personality, he is never subtle, and author Matthew Thomas does not treat him with subtlety.

Mike's wife is another striking character from this now-faded generation: intelligent, cynical, and occasionally cruel. Also an immigrant and also a drinker, she is angry and disappointed at her low station in life, but, like the growing length of ash on her cigarettes, she is something to behold. After Mike confesses to a big gambling loss, she takes retribution by choosing someone else to sponsor her citizenship. When the deed is unveiled, he is flabbergasted.

"Don't ever love anyone," she tells her daughter, Eileen. "All you'll do is break your own heart."

Young Eileen becomes a caretaker to her mother, whose disappointment leads to full-blown alcoholism. The girl is initiated in the rites of drinking too much and pouring out one's woes in bitter streams of words. Like many Irish-American women, Eileen goes into nursing, a profession unequal to her worldly ambition, which, after she marries, seeks expression in her own family.

So go the first 50 or so pages of one of the most celebrated novels of the year. Filled with countless authentic touches from the outer boroughs—the roads, the towns, the shifting mix of ethnicities—and from the periods through which the story passes, *We Are Not Ourselves* is a testament to the author's patient in-gathering of details. The social history underlying this book is well-considered and worthy of attention; but the accumulation of facts, at times, feels defensive, and adds to the novel's halting progress. After a bold beginning, the mood and pace are sometimes more reminiscent of an Irish funeral than an Irish wake.

The family at the center of this debut work is atypical in some respects. Eileen and her husband Ed Leary have only one child. Ed is a scientist with an academic career, teaching at Bronx Community College. He puts his students

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before himself and rejects offers of more money and prestige elsewhere. But Eileen is still the daughter of immigrants. The American Dream of a big house and a fast car holds a mighty grip on her imagination. And the consolation prize of a middle-class life full of integrity is hard to savor when your heart is still shopping for a four-bedroom Tudor in Westchester.

The other perspective character, besides Eileen, is her son Connell. He is the smartest kid in class and, outside of it, one of the most despised. With a best friend named Farshid, he grows up in a different Queens than the one Eileen knew as a child, which doesn't preserve him from reckless, childlike versions of the petty bigotries that help shape his mother's thinking. If there is a major flaw in this novel, it is here: A facile moralizing creeps into several moments of ethnic and racial tension. A writer from an earlier generation might have inserted a great deal of sex to make his characters come alive; this one seems to think his characters would seem unreal without repeated dabs of crude bigotry.

Ed, however, is far too high-minded for such nonsense. He dislikes the Christmas windows on Fifth Avenue, insists on offering support to underdogs, and seems to actually believe that there is no reason to move out of Queens, while all around them Eileen sees a rising brown tide of hostile immigrants. A devout Mets fan, Ed would be too good to believe except that he is mentally slipping, and, rather sadly, he seems to know it. What begins as a big ethnic novel turns, early on, into a family drama driven by Eileen's will to get out of Queens and Ed's fast-developing Alzheimer's.

Matthew Thomas develops numerous excellent scenes throughout. Some of the early repartee between Ed and Eileen delightfully captures the tension in their not-always-harmonious views on life. One night, when Eileen is short-staffed at the hospital, she finds herself searching the floor for a lost pill only to discover her bed-ridden patient transfixed by the sight of her attractive posterior. As Connell grows up, he cluelessly backs himself into adulthood, unconsciously undoing much of the effort expended on his behalf by others.

The better material adds up, but slowly, and Thomas is not one for the light touch. In the Irish-American household, you have withheld affection and bad cooking, puritans of a certain type; in the apartment upstairs, a Latino family dotes on each other, endures life's setbacks with infinite patience, and cooks much tastier food. Fair enough—but on the third or fourth trip around this block, my eyes started to roll, though I should add that I say this as an Irish-American Roman Catholic who grew up in Queens and has eaten his share of bland cooking.

Thomas's writing, always solid, is occasionally wordy and stiff. For example, a robotic-sounding voice of fate takes over whenever Eileen determines some new direction in life:

> When Connell was a couple of months old, she realized, as though she'd awoken from an extended slumber, that his coming into the world had been a matter of grave importance. . . . She would build the future on the boy.

All that aside, the drama surrounding Ed's illness, which takes up more than half the novel, is very moving. The disease robs Eileen of her husband and robs Ed of Eileen. Connell's childish selfishness comes into sharp relief. They are all desperately alone, cast out from the bonds of affection that make life worth living. Here is, I think, the best writing in this novel: a tragic series of events pitting modest, and even misguided, attempts to make a better life against the great destructive power of disease. ♦

B&A

Uncommon Ancestor

The use and abuse of Abraham.

BY BENJAMIN BALINT

The Family of Abraham
Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Interpretations
by Carol Bakhos
Harvard, 296 pp., $39.95

As the theological undercurrents of the present Middle East turmoil roil ever closer to the surface, well-meaning observers in the West have increasingly looked toward a common biblical ancestor to heal conflict among Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Bruce Feiler's bestselling *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* (2002), for example, reassures us that "despite the violence, the misunderstanding, and the history of reinterpretation that attends his name, Abraham still is the root of our common heritage and the example for reunion among his children."

Similar strains of universalism, sometimes embellished with apologetics, have more recently been sounded in the academy. In announcing Oxford University's new chair in Abrahamic religions, Professor George Pattison of the theology faculty said, "Jews, Christians, and Muslims all refer to Abraham as a friend of God, and I hope that the establishment of this important post will contribute to deepening friendship amongst these three great religions in their diverse quests to honor God rightly."

But Carol Bakhos of UCLA, in her lucid new book, challenges the notion that the first patriarch can be so innocuously pressed into the service of interfaith reconciliation. "This

Benjamin Balint is a writer in Jerusalem.

understanding of Abraham," she argues, "is rooted neither in Scripture nor in early interpretive traditions but rather in the rhetoric of twentieth-century ecumenical advocacy of religious tolerance and understanding."

As Jews, Christians, and Muslims forged their respective faiths, Bakhos writes, each evoked and defined itself against the figure of Abraham, who is described in Genesis as "father of a multitude of nations." She opens her nuanced reading of those traditions—each of which claims to be the sole authentic heir of Abraham's legacy—with a simple question: "Exactly what is Abrahamic about Judaism, Christianity, and Islam?"

In Genesis, Abraham is the forefather of the Jewish people, a 10th-generation descendant of Noah who is singled out as the bearer of an unconditional covenant which will be that people's most precious patrimony. This first patriarch exhibits great faith (heeding God's command to leave his native Mesopotamia and his father's home for an unknown land), bold compassion (arguing with God to spare the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah), and profound hospitality (welcoming strangers).

Yet Bakhos notes that nowhere does Genesis depict Abraham as arguing with pagans and idolaters. He never fulminates against false gods or rival deities. Neither is he a teacher or proselytizer. Nor, with the exception of circumcision, does he observe Mosaic law. In fact, the ultimate act required of him, the sacrifice of his son, is the very command that cannot be universalized into law.

Such stories come later, when the rabbinic tradition begins to grapple with the early Christian critique of law. Only in the imaginative literature called *midrash* does Abraham smash his father's idols. Only in the Mishnah, the earliest compilation of Jewish law, is he said, with some anachronistic license, to have "practiced the entire Torah before it was given."

In Genesis, however, what matters above all is the question of succession—and it isn't a question that portends well for interfaith dialogue. Ishmael, Abraham's firstborn (and the subject of an earlier book by Bakhos), is banished. By the early Middle Ages, Bakhos writes, the rabbinic imagination had identified Ishmael with Islam. Isaac, the younger son, is chosen to carry on the covenantal line. "If anything," Bakhos writes, this is one instance of how well-meaning talk of confraternity "maintains deeply entrenched misconceptions of Islam, and on some level aggravates the very antagonism it hopes to ameliorate."

'Abraham Casting Out Hagar and Ishmael' by Gian-Francesco Guercino (1657)

If the Jewish Abraham founds a nation, the Christian Abraham undermines the theological significance of nations themselves. If Judaism represents Abraham as the first partner of God's unretracted promise, Christianity understands him (and his family) as foreshadowing the fulfillment of that promise and the culmination of the covenant.

Take, for instance, his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Paul declares that God, like Abraham, "did not withhold his own Son." (In the Koran's account of this paradigmatic gesture of submission to God's will, the son Abraham intends to sacrifice goes unnamed, and early Islamic exegetes disagreed about whether it was Ishmael or Isaac.)

The Christian allegorical reading also takes in Abraham's banishment, at Sarah's request, of Hagar and their son Ishmael: Isaac, the younger, spiritual son, born of a miraculous conception, supersedes the carnal older brother. For church fathers, Sarah, the free woman and chosen wife, represents the church; Hagar, the rejected slave woman, represents the synagogue, wandering in the wilderness, blinded to the lifegiving waters of Christ.

Abraham is still the reference point: The Gospel of Matthew opens with a genealogy of "Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham"; Paul introduces himself in Romans as "an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham." But Bakhos shows that, as early Christians expanded the notion of family from a people to a church—a universal community that, in the end, will include all peoples—they replaced the idea of biological lineage with spiritual lineage.

In Luke, John the Baptist uses the figure of Abraham to admonish those who persist in thinking in genealogical terms: "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." For Paul, as well, one can circumvent Abraham's children, the people of Israel, and still seek the God of Abraham. Abraham is not only the father of the Jews, he says, but "the father of all who have faith." After all, Abraham was reckoned to be righteous long before the revelation of the Torah. An early strain of Christianity took this to mean that the Jews were no longer Abraham's heirs, no longer the people of the covenant. In about the year 100, the Epistle of Barnabas already calls Abraham "father of the Gentiles."

In the final third of her book, Bakhos, who studied early Islam in Beirut and Damascus, illustrates how the Islamic adoption of Abraham largely sidesteps questions of chosenness and lineage: "Abraham is a father of nations in Islam," she writes, "but his father-

hood does not play a pivotal role in the community's theological understanding of itself." The Koran, which mentions him more often than any other biblical figure, places Abraham at the beginning of a series of prophets that culminates in Muhammad. He implores his father to reject idolatry, professes the oneness of God, surrenders to His inscrutable will, and, together with Ishmael, builds the Kaabah in Mecca. He is Khalil Allah, the "friend of God" (a phrase that earlier appeared in Hebrew in Isaiah). Yet the Koran does not see him in universal terms: "Abraham was neither a Jew nor a Christian," it declares. It rather refers to Islam as *millat Ibrahim*, the "religion of Abraham."

All of this makes abundantly clear that there is not one but three Abrahams. Bakhos is not the first to argue that there can be no "universal" Abraham, or to cast a skeptical eye on the simplifications and obfuscations that adhere to the very category "Abrahamic." But she proves uniquely attuned to the interpretive richness with which each tradition fashioned and refashioned its own Abraham and, therefore, to the perils of detaching a pluralistic one-size-fits-all Abraham from the particular traditions that, for better or worse, have so enduringly granted him life and meaning.

Alfred North Whitehead once quipped that the history of Western philosophy is a footnote to Plato. If Carol Bakhos is any guide, today's contentious continuities and discontinuities among Jews, Christians, and Muslims may none too hopefully be said to be a footnote to Abraham. ♦

B&A

American Blueprint

The United States and its Constitution, one and inseparable. BY TERRY EASTLAND

This, the "concise edition" of *Liberty and Union*, is an abridgment of a larger, two-volume work. It contains a glossary of legal terms ("writ," for example, is a court order), tables of cases, a list of the 118 (so far) justices of the Supreme Court, and the texts of the Declaration of Independence, Articles of Confederation, and Constitution. And in a bow to the way we live today, which is to say digitally, the concise edition offers readers access to an interactive website that has links to primary and secondary sources, including cases, constitutional and historical documents, and scholarly articles. *Liberty and Union* is thus a newfangled thing, a *living* book.

And it has a clear purpose. The coauthors—Edgar J. McManus, professor emeritus of history at Queens College, and Tara Helfman, a professor at Syracuse Law School—take care to explain that *Liberty and Union* is not a history of the Constitution, but "a constitutional history of the United States." Thus, it pays attention not just to the making of the Constitution but also to the "century and a half of constitutional development [that] preceded the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention." Further, while the book treats what the Supreme Court has said in numerous constitutional cases, it also recognizes that constitutional history is found not only in judicial (also known as constitutional) review, but in actions taken by the elective branches and the states.

Liberty and Union
A Constitutional History of the United States, Concise Edition
by Edgar J. McManus and Tara Helfman
Routledge, 752 pp., $93.95

Terry Eastland is an executive editor at THE WEEKLY STANDARD.

So this "constitutional history of the United States" may also be described as "a history of American constitutionalism"—constitutionalism being, the authors observe, "the most powerful and durable ideology this country has produced." Their purpose, they write, is "to provide a readable account of how constitutionalism has functioned over the years." And in that they have succeeded. The focus on constitutionalism is present in the title, which is taken from Daniel Webster's famous reply to Robert Hayne in their 1830 Senate debate over the nature of our national government. Webster ended his remarks this way: "Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable!" Those two great ideas were then, and remain now, great pillars of American constitutionalism.

In a book of more than 640 pages, excluding appendices and index, McManus and Helfman tell the story of our constitutionalism in 33 chapters, the first one being "English and Colonial Origins" and the last "The Roberts Court." Each of the chapters contains short entries (averaging a page or two each) on key episodes. Thus, "English and Colonial Origins" treats, among its 20 entries, Magna Carta and the divine right monarchy, while "The Roberts Court" discusses, among its 11 entries, the Affordable Care Act and marriage equality and the Court.

There is no shorting of the older history and its significance. For example, while the Declaration of Independence was, at the time of its writing, "only a political document framed to rally support for independence," it is "perhaps the most important document" of American constitutionalism, setting forth "with stirring clarity not only the reasons for the break with Britain but the principles to which Americans committed themselves as a free and independent nation."

Regarding the government established under the Articles of Confederation, the authors relate the familiar reasons for its failure but also observe its "notable successes." The Confederation

government succeeded in prosecuting the war against Britain, bringing it to an end by way of the Treaty of Paris, merely "the single most important treaty in American history." Then, too, it passed the Land Ordinance for the distribution and settlement of the Western lands, which wound up defining basic land policy in the United States until the Civil War. It also enacted the Northwest Ordinance, which arranged for the government of the territories north and west of the Ohio River. "The importance of the Northwest Ordinance cannot be exaggerated," write McManus and Helfman, as it established "territorial principles that were followed by the United States for more than a century," giving "a gloss of legitimacy to future westward expansion."

After the Civil War, the Supreme Court began to assume an increasingly large role in American life. The Court's decisions attract the authors' attention, and rightly so, since judicial doctrines adopted early in the 20th century, during the New Deal and then during the Warren Court, set the stage for many of the constitutional cases that the Court has been asked to decide in the past half-century, chief among them *Roe* v. *Wade* (1973), which created a woman's constitutional right to abortion. Not surprisingly, judicial selection since the Warren Court has become more and more contested, as witnessed by the confirmation fight in 1987 over the nomination of Judge Robert Bork, which the authors carefully treat here.

Liberty and Union is made the more engaging by the authors' assessments, as they may offer the reader something with which to quarrel. The modern president they admire the most is Dwight Eisenhower, and they give high marks to the body of judicial work by Ike's Supreme Court appointees, including the liberal chief justice, Earl Warren. They nicely describe as a hallmark of the Burger Court "the jurisprudence of temporizing." They offer a nuanced discussion of the legality of affirmative action, but leave this reader exasperated by their conclusion—which is that both sides in the debate are right. Regarding the constitutional challenge to Obamacare, they venture that, "had [John Roberts] not been chief justice, he probably would have voted to overturn the law completely, but as custodian of the court's traditional role in the constitutional life of the nation he had more compelling priorities."

Maybe that explains it.

Liberty and Union is designed for students in short, single-semester courses. But it is also a valuable resource for anyone interested in the origins of the American experiment, its development, and its prospect. And for Americans, in particular, it teaches something transcendently important about our politics, which is that we have (as the authors put it) "no royal family, state religion, or common ethnicity cementing [our] links with one another. We have only the Constitution and the way of life it guarantees in creating the commonality of nationhood. It is what holds us together and legitimizes our political aspirations." ♦

The Laughs on Us

What used to make Americans smile, and still does.

BY PETER TONGUETTE

American Cornball
A Laffopedic Guide to the Formerly Funny
by Christopher Miller
Harper, 544 pp., $35

This past summer, as I sat in a movie theater about to watch *Girl Shy* (1924), a nine-decade-old comedy starring Harold Lloyd, I wondered what the uninitiated audience would think. This was a silent movie, and it isn't easy to trade spoken dialogue for pantomime. And then there was the star of the production: Although Lloyd is my own favorite of the silent comic actors, to utter his name to most people under the age of, say, 70 is to risk the rebuttal, "Harold who?" Yet, in spite of everything, *Girl Shy* worked, both for me and, judging by their laughter, for many others in the audience—most of whom, to my eyes, were under 70. Our laughs were hearty, unfaked, unironic.

I was pleasantly surprised, then, to find an approving mention of *Girl Shy* in this all-inclusive guide to purportedly passé humor. *American Cornball* marches through dozens of topics (alphabetically arranged) that, its author argues, were long ago grist for America's comic mill but are no more. These topics include "cops and nightsticks," "hats, women's," "henpecked husbands," and "midnight snacks." *Girl Shy* comes up in the entry on "nincompoops." Therein, Miller tangentially discusses the adjective "bashful" when used to refer to "male shyness vis-à-vis women," and *Girl Shy*, with its central character's reticent stance towards the opposite sex, fits the bill.

Although Christopher Miller claims to appreciate humor that deviates from what he calls "the usual joke about men and sex . . . that it's all men think about," he admits, earlier in the same sentence, that jokes lobbed affectionately in the direction of bashful males are "seldom very funny." Tell that to the audience who guffawed at *Girl Shy*. The somewhat shaky premise of *American Cornball* is that most of the comic categories it discusses—romantically timid bachelors among them—have lost their capacity to bring forth laughs. "Some are still good for a laugh," Miller writes, "but few are as funny as they used to be, and the most laughable

Peter Tonguette is at work on a book about Peter Bogdanovich.

thing about many is that people did once find them funny."

To be sure, Miller—blessed with seemingly limitless recall of not just movies but comic strips, postcards, and wisecracks from the first half of the 20th century—has produced a fair share of clunkers to back up his assertion. The laughter-inducing properties of, say, Limburger cheese or old maids have certainly dimmed with time, and Miller is right to remind us how much blatantly racist and sexist humor was once in general circulation. On the other hand, to leaf through these pages is to be reminded of American humor's ample treasures, many of which have aged rather well. There is enduring wisdom in Preston Sturges's 1941 litany for comic success, quoted here, in part: "A kitten is better than a dog. A baby is better than a kitten. A kiss is better than a baby. A pratfall is better than anything." Don't these preferences still hold true?

From time to time, Miller goes against his premise—that much of the humor he describes is *démodé*—and lets his enthusiasm get the better of him, as when he recounts the abundance of tumbling anvils in 1950s Looney Tunes cartoons. *Going! Going! Gosh!* (1952), for example, features Wile E. Coyote aloft in a weather balloon, with anvil in tow. But after he lets go of the anvil, with Road Runner below, "the balloon deflates and the coyote and his garbage cart plunge groundward, passing the anvil on the way down (because, as the Ninth Law of Cartoon Physics mandates, 'Everything falls faster than an anvil')." Naturally, the anvil strikes Wile E. Coyote.

No matter the decade, it would seem, anvil-based gags (like piano- or safe-based gags, also discussed here) are reliably riotous.

So are pie fights, which Miller writes about with similar thoughtfulness and appreciation. Discussing the supersized pie fight included in the Jack Lemmon/Tony Curtis farce *The Great Race* (1965), Miller notes that "when an already-pie-spattered character" is struck repeatedly, the joke loses its punch: "That's why the director, Blake Edwards, waits till the end of the scene before the charmed, immaculate, white-suited Tony Curtis is finally pied."

Miller is at his strongest when tracing the lineage of (or explaining the logic behind) comic characters and situations. He has done his homework. For example, he knows that the comic strip "Bringing Up Father" popularized the image of a housewife using a rolling pin to attack her husband, and that the Murphy bed was already being milked for laughs the same year it was made available on the market (1900). Not only are these backstories interesting and well told, Miller's descriptions of individual scenes or ideas are often very funny—even when he insists that what he is describing is not.

Harold Lloyd (center) in 'Girl Shy' (1924)

NEWSCOM

Miller misunderstands how pop culture survives the decades. A particular joke may no longer play if transposed to our time, but that does not mean the original loses its efficacy. In other words, while Steve Carell contending with a Murphy bed would probably leave much to be desired, Charlie Chaplin contending with one—in *One A.M.* (1916)—retains its appeal.

The humor itemized in *American Cornball* sometimes has another thing going for it beyond continued funniness: a pleasingly moralistic perspective. Humor in America used to target behavior that was commonly frowned upon, like gum-chewing or drunkenness, as well as unsavory personality types, such as layabouts (see the entry on "brothers-in-law") or those seeking instant wealth (see the entry on "get-rich-quick schemes"). Discussing the familiar sight in single-panel cartoons of a drunk being given the heave-ho by a bartender, Miller writes: "The image of a drunk being tossed out of a rough bar is especially funny to people who never set foot in rough bars, only hasten past, and for whom the drunks tossed out the door suggest the unimaginable rowdiness within." In his entry on "bums," Miller describes the fine distinction drawn by Nancy, namesake of Ernie Bushmiller's comic strip, when it comes to indigents in her town: "Hunger gets her sympathy, but sloth just gets her goat."

In fact, some of what was subject to ridicule in the humor of yesteryear is relevant in our own nanny state: In the entry on "do-gooders," Miller writes that the typical example of such was "a middle-class man, probably college-educated, and in any case convinced that he knew more than blue-collar workers about their own jobs and lives." Sound familiar? There was even occasionally a preachy quality to old-time comedy, apparent in a postcard urging bachelors to consider married life: We see a bedraggled man with holes in his trousers, accompanied by a caption stating, "Wanted: A Wife Who Can Sew, That's All!" A surefire way to promote marriage among the unattached, Miller writes, was "to convince them and their married counterparts that men can't cook, and need to marry if they want to eat well." ♦

B&A

Old-Time Religion

The perilous lives of Elizabethan Catholics.

BY J. J. SCARISBRICK

The Gunpowder Plot conspirators

MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY / EVERETT COLLECTION

God's Traitors
Terror and Faith in Elizabethan England
by Jessie Childs
Oxford, 472 pp., $29.95

Despite its rather contrived title, this is a fine book: extraordinarily learned, exciting (most of the time), and beautifully written. There is already an enormous body of writing about how English Catholicism survived the tidal wave of the Protestant Reformation under Elizabeth, but this study must have a special place therein.

It centers on one distinguished Roman Catholic dynasty: the Vaux (pronounced *Vorx*) family of Harrowden Hall in Northamptonshire, which, along with Huddlestones, Treshams, Catesbys, and dozens of others—many of them linked by marriage—formed the backbone of Catholic recusancy (i.e., nonconformity, from the Latin *recusare*: to refuse). Recently ennobled at the time of the Reformation and well connected, the Vauxes were a good choice. But, as it happens, they had already been biographed by a very distinguished historian of recusancy, Father Godfrey Anstruther, in the 1950s. His is a learned and lively book, and it should have received more recognition in this one. But this is an even better book—even more lively and learned, and a historiographical age away from its predecessor. So, yes, we needed it.

And what a story it tells: plots and counterplots, assassinations and Armadas, horrendous torture and unspeakably gruesome executions, stinking prisons, secret messages written in orange juice (invisible until heated), spies and traitors and clandestine printing presses. Hollywood could not have made it up.

Jessie Childs is not Roman Catholic, but she is remarkably fair and astute in her judgments and (though she should not say that Catholics believe that the Eucharistic presence is a *physical* one) has a deep understanding of Catholic culture. She understands how bewildering it was for Catholics to find that the faith of their forefathers (and of English kings and queens since time immemorial) was now treason and that they apparently had to choose between queen and pope—let alone between queen and the king of Spain, who conveniently believed that Holy Mother Church was best served by Spanish imperialism.

Childs also understands how the arrival in England of the refugee Mary Queen of Scots, that most fatal of fatal women and immediately the centerpiece of Catholic plots against Elizabeth, heightened the dilemma of those Catholics who wanted to be both loyal subjects and loyal to the faith. She explains well how a Catholic family like the Vauxes could be constantly fined for nonattendance at their parish church, in and out of prison for their recusancy, excluded from the universities and professions, unable to travel, and subject to the sudden siege and ransacking of their house by sheriffs and their men (plus sniffer dogs) searching for priests in "hides" in attics and stairwells—even sewers.

There are saints and sinners galore. There is Henry Vaux, devout son of the third baron and no mean poet, wholly dedicated to serving the young Jesuit mission to England, launched in 1580. There is Ambrose Vaux, his stepbrother and a swashbuckling tearaway. There are those astonishing Jesuits: dazzling Edmund Campion, of course, sometime tutor of that same Henry Vaux; John Gerard, the only man ever to escape from the Tower of London; Henry Garnet, superior of the Jesuit mission and one of the Society of Jesus' most admirable English sons, a martyr who was never canonized and is subject to exact probing in this book. Then there is the sadist Richard Topcliffe, who delighted in racking Jesuits almost to death and who seems to have made a young Catholic female prisoner pregnant. He also (can this be true?) claimed that he was wont to "pleasure" sexually the queen herself.

It is three other women, Anne and Elizabeth Vaux, daughters of that same third baron, and Eliza, their

J.J. Scarisbrick, professor emeritus of history at the University of Warwick, is the author of Henry VIII.

stepsister, who steal the show. Unmarried Anne gave her all to caring for Garnet, moving with him as he bolted from one safe house to another in order to elude detection; Elizabeth, a fiery widow, was another devotee of Garnet and mother of a zealous Catholic family; Eliza, no less committed, was a particular associate of John Gerard. All three were hunted down and suffered for their faith. Anne spent time in the Tower of London, and Eliza was sent to another London jail, the Fleet. They were not the only ones. As the author explains, women played a crucial role in the story of this underground Catholicism: harboring and succoring the missionary priests, guarding Mass vestments, portable altars, missals, and relics—and, above all, catechizing their children and even their servants.

Holy women had hitherto usually been nuns or hermits. Now it was laywomen—virgins like Anne Vaux, as well as mothers and wives presiding over Catholic households—who led the way, and were even being martyred.

This is a big book. One of the hazards of making a family history the centerpiece of a larger story is that the reader may have to stomach more than a little genealogy and petty (or, at any rate, peripheral) family squabbles. And this is true here. There are *longueurs*—such as the bewildering fracas with a Vaux brother-in-law, Sir Thomas Tresham, who was a devout, pig-headed maverick. But the reader should stick at it. One is always soon out of the undergrowth and back in the clear light of day.

The climax is the infamous Gunpowder Plot of November 1605—a plot as wicked as it was disastrous for the Roman Catholic cause. Childs explains vividly how it came about that a group of violent Catholic hotheads—jihadists, indeed—maddened by decades of persecution and brought to blind anger by the failure of the new monarch, James I (son of Mary Queen of Scots, whom many Catholics regarded as a martyr), to honor his promise of toleration, decided on fearful revenge. They would slaughter the king, his wife, ministers, peers, bishops, and likely many MPs in one colossal explosion as James came to the House of Lords to open the second session of his first Parliament. The plotters would then seize power for themselves.

This is a huge subject in itself. Gallons of ink have been spent on it, and there are many questions still to be answered. For example, was not the plot known to—and carefully "nursed" for his own nefarious purposes by—that arch-villain (as Catholics saw him) Robert Cecil, the king's chief minister? Were some of the plotters double agents? Once the plot was "discovered" and its ringleaders had fled, what were they planning to do? Above all, who was the "great nobleman" who would presumably have claimed the throne—and without whom the plotters (who were "mere" gentlemen and knights) could never have rallied the necessary support?

There is another book for the gifted Jessie Childs to write. ♦

B&A

Hope and Glory

A century commanding the show business heights.

BY JOHN PODHORETZ

Hope
Entertainer of the Century
by Richard Zoglin
Simon & Schuster, 576 pp., $30

This book is something of a Rube Goldberg machine. Its author, *Time* theater critic Richard Zoglin, makes enormous claims about the cultural importance of his subject: He calls Bob Hope "the entertainer of the century," the first person to be a star in every medium, the man seen by more people in person than anyone else in history, even the inventor of stand-up comedy. But the book that contains these claims is so turgid it belies them. No one who was supposedly so central to the life and times of the 20th century could have been this uninteresting, on stage and off.

Zoglin must have thought he had hit biographer's gold when he took on the job of serving as Hope's first serious posthumous chronicler; but after years of prospecting, he's dug up very little that's shiny from a very deep mine. On the surface, Hope lived an extraordinarily long and fantastically colorful life: He was born poor in England and struggled in America, spending years wandering around the back alleys of the Middle West on the vaudeville circuit before breaking big on Broadway, and then becoming a star on radio, in movies, and on television.

Bob Hope (1938)

NBC / GETTY IMAGES

He risked his life to entertain troops over the course of five wars and four

John Podhoretz, editor of Commentary, *is* The Weekly Standard*'s movie critic.*

decades, and he came to know just about everybody there was to know on the planet during his lifetime. But Hope had nothing interesting to say to them—or, later, about them. He was a wonderfully smooth singer and dancer, but not especially notable at doing either. He was a movie star who made a dozen major hits that all melted into air the second the audience was finished watching them. He rattled off literally tens of thousands of one-liners as perfectly as they could be delivered. And not one of those jokes survived his death at the age of 100 in 2003.

What surrounded Hope was the birth, adolescence, and maturation of popular culture in multiple media. He did surpassingly well in all, but did nothing groundbreaking in any. Zoglin describes Hope's skits on stage and over the air, all his movies, his television shows, his monologues, his Oscar-hosting, his guest bits, and various side jobs, in granular detail. But so few of them come across as especially amusing that one finishes reading *Hope: Entertainer of the Century* baffled rather than enlightened about his durable fame. Surely someone who cast such a large shadow ought to have been memorable, somehow. Zoglin's book spends so much time on how well this movie did and how well that TV special rated that one suspects he's trying to convince himself Hope is worth the grind.

Bob Hope was a star for 40 years and a legend for 30 more, and through it all, he skated on the surface as no one has done before or since. He was all technique, no substance—as a performer, perhaps the most superficial star who ever lived. The same seems to have been true about his private life. He had few close friends; even he and Bing Crosby, with whom he formed the original buddy-comedy team, kept each other at arm's length. He was a pretty good boss, but not a great one, and he would complain about reimbursing taxi fare. He was married for 70 years to the same woman, with whom he adopted four children. He was a distant father and a decent brother, neither particularly loving nor notably unloving, and a relatively prudent husband.

Though he had many affairs, he did everything he could to spare Dolores (and himself) the indignity of public exposure and was the subject of only two scandal-sheet exposés about his wanderings over the course of his career. The most horrifying detail in this book is one that Zoglin, who is anything but a sensationalist, simply tosses off: Three of Hope's long-term mistresses eventually committed suicide. Surely this speaks to a darker quality in Hope's character, an attraction toward the self-destructive or a tendency to enable self-destruction. But if so, trying to make sense of it is beyond Zoglin's capacities as a biographer.

Bob Hope, Bing Crosby (1940)

So is taking proper account of the formidable grey matter Hope clearly possessed. Zoglin mentions in passing that Hope had a photographic memory and that, until his faculties began to fade, he knew every joke he had ever told, and where he had told it. He also had an ability to recall names and faces over the space of decades, a talent any politician would envy.

"His ordinariness was inimitable," Zoglin writes in a passage attempting to capture "the machinelike impersonality of Hope's comedy" and draw a parallel to the impersonality of Hope's private life. But a man who sits at home at his own dinner table and says nothing (as Hope did) when he cannot help but entertain everybody else on earth is a person who genuinely needs to lose himself in his own depths. And that contrast is what would make him a genuinely interesting biographical subject. It's admirable that Zoglin only wishes to stick to the facts he has garnered, but his inability to get inside Hope makes this book just as surface-bound as Hope's own career.

Hope's special brief was to entertain troops, which he began doing in earnest just before World War II and continued to do until he was nearly 90, for the Americans deployed to the Middle East in the first Gulf war. It was his most admirable role, and in performing it for so long, and under genuinely punishing conditions, he showed true bravery and self-sacrifice. But he also knew, or must have known, that he was creating a halo effect that elevated him almost beyond criticism, until the national split over Vietnam forced him to become—however briefly and almost entirely unwillingly—a figure of ludicrous controversy.

Long before this point, Zoglin writes, Hope had "transcended comedy; he was the nation's designated mood-lifter." It's not nothing to lift a nation's mood—far from it—and Bob Hope earned every dollar he made. But by definition, mood is a fleeting thing. Bob Hope was not the entertainer of the century. He was, at best, its master of ceremonies. ♦

SILVER SCREEN COLLECTION / GETTY IMAGES

B&A

A Visual Dialogue

What connoisseurs talk about when they talk among themselves. BY JAMES GARDNER

Rendez-vous with Art
by Philippe de Montebello
and Martin Gayford
Thames & Hudson, 248 pp., $35

Few books of late have pleased me as much as this one. Whether it will interest anyone else is an open question, but it might, and it should. In essence, this book consists of an ongoing dialogue between two very cultured men, Philippe de Montebello, former director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Martin Gayford, former art critic for the *Spectator*. The pair meet periodically in the great museums of Europe and America and discuss Old Master paintings. Sometimes, it is true, they range more broadly, with interesting things to say about Greek vases, Assyrian reliefs, and Gothic statuary. But the bulk of their conversation is devoted to Titian, Velázquez, Rubens, and Goya, as well as to many lesser-known masters of ages past.

Philippe de Montebello

The most surprising thing about *Rendez-vous with Art* is that it exists at all. In the past decade, the museum world—reflecting the shifting interests of the public—has become strangely fixated on contemporary art, with an appreciable diminution of interest in most everything else, not least the Old Masters. When these do receive attention, especially from publishers, the focus usually turns to megastars like Leonardo, Vermeer, or Michelangelo, and the results tend to be silly and irrelevant. How welcome, then, that these two men are so unapologetic in their appetite for older art, and that they exhibit such admirable depth and sensitivity on the subject. They speak with as much discernment about the Master of Moulins and Antonello da Messina as about Rubens and Poussin.

Let it also be said that they make for an appealing, if unlikely, pair. In contrast to de Montebello's imperious prolixity—a quality that will be familiar to all who have had dealings with him at the Met—Gayford is soft-spoken, self-effacing, and economical in his responses. This is true to such a degree that many passages read as though Gayford were interviewing de Montebello; indeed, as though he were James Boswell to de Montebello's Samuel Johnson. Yet both have valuable things to say, and because Gayford writes the prose that initiates and concludes each dialogue, he has the last word.

The mere act of devoting a book like this to Old Master paintings, or in any case to pre-19th-century art, suggests an almost polemical conservatism. In this context, de Montebello's outspoken insistence on such superannuated notions as quality and authenticity is almost unheard-of today. Indeed, in the service of these ideas, he expresses himself in a manner so true to himself that, were a playwright to put those same words in his mouth, one might reject them as heavy-handed caricature.

At one point, as the two men are walking around Florence, they come upon Giambologna's "Perseus." Uncertain whether it is the original, de Montebello explains, "I not only dislike, but also disapprove of, being unsure." Elsewhere, in comparing a Boucher and Fragonard in the Wallace Collection, he says, "Well, you know my proclivity for hierarchies, so I'll say right off that this Fragonard is one step up from a Boucher." I would conjecture that that is the first and last time in the past half-century that anyone in the art world has used the word "hierarchy" by way of approbation.

Later on, as they stand in front of Rubens's *Three Graces* (1630-35) in the Prado, de Montebello exuberates in the language of a glorified docent: "I just love the opalescent flesh tones of these luxuriant nudes, the nacreous reflections on the skin." At the same time, however, he reveals himself to be a master of blunt Anglo-Saxon, as in this priceless exchange (with which I fully concur) about the Musée du Quai Branly, the museum of primitive art on the Left Bank of the Seine:

> *Gayford*: It's a labyrinth. So it suggests confusion. We're lost in the forest of a postmodernist architect's imagination.
>
> *De Montebello*: I hate this place.

But beyond such deft character strokes, this is a deeper and far more valuable book than, perhaps, I have suggested. Both men have thought long and hard about art and museums, and their book presents the fruits of such reflection. We learn, for example, that de Montebello has a blind spot for Turner, that he becomes less interested

James Gardner is the translator, most recently, of Girolamo Fracastoro's Latin Poetry *for the I Tatti Renaissance Library (Harvard).*

NEWSCOM

in Dutch landscapes with each day that passes, and that he was initially bored by Greek vases. What is interesting about these admissions is that any critic in the broader sense, whether of art or literature or music, has just these pockets of inattention regarding what he knows he is supposed to admire, and may indeed acknowledge to be admirable, but which he simply cannot find it in himself to enjoy. Yet one rarely hears anyone confessing to such things as candidly as de Montebello does here.

There follow meditations on the role of the museum in a world of ever-expanding tourism, and the philosophical implications of originals over the reproductions. As one might expect from the former director of a major museum, de Montebello insists on the value of exposure to the real object—although he admits, with some reluctance, that sometimes it is as profitable, if not more so, to examine reproductions. But the subject soon turns to such sublunary issues as how close to stand to a painting (de Montebello suggests a foot-and-a-half). By the same reasoning, he wryly remarks that the *Mona Lisa* doesn't need to be cleaned because, at this point, due to all the crowds that surround it, one can no longer even see it.

Not the least value of this volume is its discussion of a matter that never makes it into art writing, neither criticism nor art history: the physical and emotional interaction between the painting on the wall and the human who stands before it, in a state of greater or lesser receptivity. At one point, de Montebello reveals that he has a bad back, and that this affects his response to art. The elaborate frame around Raphael's *Madonna della Sedia* (1514), as well as the general decor of the Palazzo Pitti, exerts an equal influence on the predisposition of both men to examine the art before them.

Of course, neither Philippe de Montebello nor Martin Gayford is what one could call an Everyman. They are both men of rare culture, and it is no small consolation that—in spite of so much evidence to the contrary—such people still exist, and that, in *Rendez-vous with Art*, we have the opportunity to eavesdrop on their conversation. ♦

B&A

The Transition Years

How, and why, George Washington stepped back onstage. BY ALEC D. ROGERS

'General Washington Resigning His Commission' by John Trumbull (1817)

The Return of George Washington
1783-1789
by Edward Larson
William Morrow, 384 pp., $29.99

If any American was ever entitled to leave behind the burdens of public life, surely it was George Washington in 1783. Having created and led the Continental Army to victory over the mightiest military on earth, he had endured much personal hardship, including having to neglect his beloved Mount Vernon for over eight years. By the time he arrived home on Christmas Eve, he had no further aspiration (as he wrote to the Marquis de Lafayette) than to remain "under the shadow of my own Vine and my own Fig tree." Only four years later, however, Washington would reemerge as a political force, presiding over the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, and then being unanimously elected president.

When historians examine episodes from Washington's career to better understand him, they frequently choose his resignation from command of the Army, or his determination to decline a third term as president. Rarely considered is his decision to *reenter* public life after the revolution. It is this neglected phase of Washington's life, between his departure from military service and his assumption of the presidency, that is the subject of this volume.

These years are often referred to as the "critical period" in American history: A postwar economic downturn, coupled with a weak central government unable to pay its debts to veterans or foreign lenders, left many

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Americans in doubt regarding the viability of their new nation. Settlers west of the Appalachians were beginning to wonder if their future lay with a bordering power such as Spain or Great Britain rather than their eastern brethren, whose taxation seemed to fall disproportionately on westerners. While some may argue that these problems are overstated, the view of many of America's leading citizens at the time was much different. Indeed, George Washington was among those who felt that things had quickly begun to go wrong after the war's end, and that the lack of unity among the states was imperiling the "Glorious Cause" for which so many had given so much.

Edward Larson notes that few books about Washington cover these years in depth, and that the numerous biographies generally focus on Washington's agricultural innovations and active family life during this period. The result can sometimes be a portrait of a Washington who emerges from Mount Vernon only with the greatest reluctance to play out a script written by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and others. Figuring actively in neither the Constitutional Convention's commencement, nor the Constitution's ratification, this Washington served mostly as a figurehead, lending little more to the proceedings than his hard-won prestige.

Larson sets out to correct what he views as misperceptions on these scores. He provides an overview of the critical period, the Constitutional Convention, and the post-convention events leading to Washington's inauguration, each from Washington's vantage point. Details about his farming and family life are played down here: We are left with a much more active and politically engaged Washington, who did as much as anyone during these years to bring the new republic into being.

One problem, of course, is that Washington's influence cannot always be seen directly, but Larson teases it out through careful study of his (deceptively) mundane actions. Although almost completely silent throughout the convention as its presiding officer, Washington chose to dine simply with the other delegates at a tavern rather than at the mansion where he lived. When the debate turned to whether the presidency could be entrusted to one man, Larson speculates that this demonstration of common familiarity helped reassure the delegates, who presumed that Washington would be their first president. He also shows us how Washington's political savvy helped ensure that the Constitution would gain acceptance. The result was a product that closely resembled what, for years, Washington had been advocating in private.

At the crux of the story, though, is Larson's explanation for why Washington ultimately abandoned a retirement from political life that he earnestly desired. Larson makes the case that the political class of the time was sold on the need for reform of the Articles of Confederation, and that all agreed Washington's active support was essential. But the key connective element is Washington's own political thought and understanding of republican duty. As Glenn Phelps has noted in his study of Washington's constitutional thought, Washington's concept of republicanism was that of Greece and Rome: "Republican hagiography demanded that its heroes always be willing to defend the republic against corruption and decay. As much to confirm his own virtue as to attain specific reforms, Washington determined to end his public 'retirement.'" The critical period played an important role in developing Washington's political philosophy, and it would have been helpful for Larson (who cites Phelps) to have invoked Washington's classical republican ideology to show how he couldn't stay away from politics once events made it clear that his participation would be decisive.

That George Washington was politically active almost immediately upon his retirement from the Continental Army has been long understood. Still, Larson has left us with a richer portrait of the vital role Washington played before, during, and after the Constitutional Convention. What emerges is not so much a man who left and then "returned" as one who remained vigilant, calibrating his participation in public life as circumstances warranted and permitted. Now we can appreciate even more fully why Washington is the indispensable figure in the history of America's founding. ♦

Highly Recommended

Academic politics, epistolary style.

BY SUSANNE KLINGENSTEIN

Dear Committee Members
A Novel
by Julie Schumacher
Doubleday, 192 pp., $22.95

If you need a break from the noxious violence in the daily news and find yourself searching for a recuperative nighttime read about the loony haplessness that is the byproduct of a free and prosperous culture—well, you can do no better than to curl up with this ingeniously conceived, wickedly funny, and ultimately very moving epistolary novel.

It consists entirely of LORs (letters of recommendation) written by the curmudgeonly, almost-dead white male

Susanne Klingenstein is the author, most recently, of a biography of the Yiddish writer Mendele Moykher Sforim.

Jason Fitger, a tenured professor of creative writing and English at Payne University ("Teach 'til It Hurts"). Writing departments tend to be universities' drainage pans, catching the lost, the unusual, the unadjusted, and, occasionally, the brilliant before they are washed out into the great sea of sink-or-swim. (Full disclosure: I spent eight years in MIT's writing program.) For many of these students, Professor Fitger is the last port of call.

Fitger's LORs, shot out in desperation toward such alien domains as The Paintball Emporium and Wexler Foods, are lifelines attempting to secure entry-level, part-time jobs and unpaid internships—or, when they are addressed to a university office, underfunded fellowships and adjunct lecturerships. Here is a letter to Kompu-Metricka:

> Ms. Vanessa Cuddigan has asked me to submit a letter of reference to your poorly spelled organization. While I have only praise for Ms. Cuddigan, who graduated two years ago with a major in English, I had expected her to ask that I recommend her for graduate school. Instead, having completed a stint with Teach for America, she is now apparently desirous of some sort of data-entry position at your firm—clearly a soul-squelching enterprise. I have asked her to explain herself but she is evasive, leading me to wonder if something unfortunate happened during the two years to destroy her ambition.

Fitger's two letters recommending (a) a psychopath and (b) a girl dissolved in tears to the mental health intervention team scrape the bottom of the barrel—and are so close to what we know to be true that it's hard to remember these are satires. But Fitger also gets to see the top: the indefatigable Vivian, who applies to law school, medical school, Yaddo, and, finally, to Fitger's own literary agent in an attempt to finagle a six-figure advance for her "coming-of-age story purportedly narrated by the first genetically engineered human-feline cross (specifically, a human/cheetah)."

The unflappable Tara, a plagiarist, shows up on January 7:

> Ms. Tara Tappani knocked at my office door this morning, and, with the air of a woman wearing diamonds and furs, entered the icy enclosure in which I work, perched at the edge of my red vinyl chair, and urged me to respond to your second e-mail request for a recommendation, as she dearly hopes to be hired as assistant editor of Sellebritta Online. I demurred. Pressed, I reminded Ms. Tappani that a year ago I gave her a well-deserved F in my Intermediate Fiction class. She chuckled and put a manicured little paw on my forearm, as if the two of us were sharing a wonderful joke. "Don't worry about that," she assured me. "I just need a letter."

The letters alone would be tremendous fun, because Schumacher's social details are dead-on and her timing for punch lines is impeccable. But there is more. As the letters progress, Fitger's biography comes into focus, exposing the ruthless egocentricity of a young writer on the make. He and several of the women to whom he must now write LORs on behalf of his students were once members of a fabled literary seminar whose leader—a cross between Lionel Trilling and F.R. Leavis—was a kingmaker because his brother was an editor at a New York publishing house. Young Fitger clawed his way to the top, and got his novel published. But his creative streak has petered out; he is divorced, abandoned, teaching Payne's lost souls, and longing to get back together with his ex-wife.

When *Dear Committee Members* opens, we find Fitger installed in a drafty office next to the leaky men's room, writing LORs that are honest to a fault, matching the flaws of the applicant to the flaws of the place requesting the LOR. The letters show, in their quirky way, Fitger's deep understanding of human misery; they add up to his best work yet. Moved by the fates of two of his students, one young, one aging, Fitger composes ever more desperate letters to secure funding that would enable them to finish their respective novels.

Dear Committee Members builds up to several moving climaxes that cannot be revealed but that lead us to conclude that the literary humanism championed by Trilling, Leavis, and Cleanth Brooks was a marvelous thing—and isn't quite dead yet. Julie Schumacher is one of its heirs. ♦

B&A

Political Care Package

Modern liberalism as a set of emotions.

BY KYLE PETERSON

The Pity Party
A Mean-Spirited Diatribe Against Liberal Compassion
by William Voegeli
Broadside, 320 pp., $26.99

Conservatives are reptiles. This is the message that progressive talking heads and Democratic campaign consultants heave at America's impressionable swing voters: Conservatives are cold, lethargic, calculating creatures who peer out at the world through diamond pupils in swampy green eyes, and who can be roused to motion only by the sight of something worth devouring.

Kyle Peterson is managing editor of the American Spectator.

Expect to hear that refrain delivered more and more often as Republicans take control of the Senate early next year. For no matter the subject—health care, food stamps, immigration, marginal tax rates—

the preferred insult for conservatives these days is not that they're wrong, or misguided, or even stupid. It's that they're cruel.

We live in an age of conspicuous compassion. Modern White House aides earn their salaries scouting the most dejected victims to adorn the next press conference or State of the Union address, and woe betide any politician who fails sufficiently to demonstrate his sympathy for the wretched and the disaffected. One of the more chewed-over statistics from the 2012 election involved what more than one pundit termed the "empathy gap." Exit pollsters for NBC gave voters four options for the quality that most affected their choice of candidate. Mitt Romney handily won Americans looking for a man who "shares my values," "is a strong leader," and "has a vision for the future." But more than a fifth of the electorate was most interested in having a president who "cares about people like me." Barack Obama won that group, 81-18.

Republicans have two options for dealing with such a problem: the easy way, and the right way.

The easy way is to soften the GOP's image. Find the party's most proficient brow-furrowers and stage a few photo ops where they can shake hands sympathetically with pensioners. Talk less about tax cuts and more about tax credits. Maybe recruit a few professional actors. The right way is to harden the electorate, attack the premise, convince voters that public empathy is a poor yardstick for choosing officeholders and government policies. This is, of course, a longer project, and a more difficult one.

But William Voegeli, senior editor of the *Claremont Review of Books*, has done yeoman's work with *The Pity Party*. He methodically demonstrates that a political movement built on empathy leaves its adherents leaning haphazardly on a rickety pile of unexamined assumptions and logical leaps. As he points out, there's a reason why "Aristotle examined compassion, which we treat as a moral virtue, in the *Rhetoric*, discussing it solely in terms of the power to move an audience. He does not mention the subject in the *Ethics* or the *Politics*."

Since the emotional calculus involved in snap decisions is unknowable, we shouldn't be surprised that, when politicians do the math of pathos, they never seem to come up with a limiting principle. Every problem is as tragic, urgent, and worthy of action as every other. Consider this gem of an argument Voegeli pulls from Matt Miller at the *Washington Post*: "If you feel it's urgent to help the victims of Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, then deep in your heart you also support Obamacare." The line is funny because it proves too much: Matt Miller might just as easily have compared hurricane relief to taxpayer-subsidized automobile insurance or federal research on Exploding Head Syndrome. What he really means is: "Here are two causes that only a monster could oppose."

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Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) on the march

Once ingrained, this kind of thinking leads to a society that (as Voegeli puts it) cares less about actually helping others than it cares about caring. Public compassion becomes an end in itself, and the machinery of government is simply a means of catharsis. Hence, the people who push the hardest for expanding government programs are the ones least interested in whether the programs actually work. Confront a progressive friend with a few statistics—the study that suggests patients on Medicaid fare even worse than those with no insurance at all, or the paper that shows enrollment in Head Start makes zero long-term difference to students' academic success—and he will reply, almost without fail, that the problem is funding. If only we had more dump trucks to ferry pallets of crisp 100-dollar bills from the Federal Reserve to various federal offices.

All this emoting leaves little room in our public discourse for much else—say, for example, calm examination of moral hazards or unintended consequences. President Obama once quoted the late movie critic Roger Ebert in a speech, saying, "Kindness covers all of my political beliefs." A conservative is likely to suggest that this explains the problem precisely.

Conservatives aren't unfeeling—no one, save the psychopath, needs to be taught empathy—but they do subordinate their emotions to higher beliefs: duty, for example, or family, or God, among others. This past summer the Pew Research Center conducted a survey that asked Americans to pick, from among a set of values, the three they think most important to inculcate in children. Across the political spectrum, the top choice was "responsibility." Thereafter, ideological skew set in. Consistently liberal respondents

next chose “empathy for others” (34 percent) and “helping others” (28 percent). Consistent conservatives picked “religious faith” (59 percent) and “hard work” (44 percent).

Voegeli puts it this way:

> To insist compassion must have its way because it is such a basic, noble emotional force; to insist that all who defy it are mean and greedy; to disdain the reality that governance’s challenges will frequently impel decent nations to subordinate compassion’s claims to those of justice, honor, liberty, and security—is to complicate and imperil self-government.

That’s a sentence every Republican member of Congress would do well to memorize. The federal government, a bureaucratic monolith of 2.7 million civilian workers, cannot empathize with its citizens, and to suggest otherwise is to anthropomorphize. Individual employees of bureaus and agencies are capable of feeling compassion—but as the VA and IRS have recently shown, they do not make a habit of it. A president should be chosen for his competence, vision, and fortitude, not his ability to project benevolence on television. ◆

The Reacher File

Lee Child’s creation, in the great tradition.

BY **JON L. BREEN**

Supersleuths in the mode of Sherlock Holmes, Lord Peter Wimsey, and Hercule Poirot are an endangered species. With scattered exceptions, the Great Detective has fallen out of fashion in favor of mere smart people—driven cops, dogged private eyes, curious amateurs—without special deductive powers.

Holmes and Poirot are always with us. The Baker Street master is reimagined each year by various hands, and the fussy Belgian has a new case in Sophie Hannah’s *The Monogram Murders*, authorized by the Agatha Christie estate. (The result is ambitious and well-meant but ultimately unsatisfactory: If Christie had any plots as far-fetched as this one, she could at least make them believable in the reading, which Hannah does not.)

The original books by Christie and Doyle live on, but where are their contemporary successors? One of them has come to the mystery masquerade in the most deceptive of disguises, as a writer of action thrillers: Lee

Jon L. Breen is the author, most recently, of Probable Claus.

Personal
A Jack Reacher Novel
by Lee Child
Delacorte, 368 pp., $28

Child. And the 21st-century Sherlock Holmes is a six-foot-five bruiser named Jack Reacher.

Child, an Englishman who worked in television before turning to novels, now lives in the United States and nails the American idiom. His character shares his outsider viewpoint. Reacher’s childhood as the son of a well-traveled U.S. Marine, and his equally nomadic adult career as an Army military policeman, have made him a stranger in his own country. Retired with the rank of major, he is a happily homeless drifter, constitutionally unable to stay in one place for long. Fully exploring his home country for the first time, he takes odd jobs—bouncer, swimming pool digger—and avoids possessions. He wears one set of clothes until he throws it away, and then he replaces it with another. He is unfamiliar with, or wary of, everyday accoutrements (bank accounts, credit cards, mortgages) that others take for granted, but he is incomparable at helping people in danger and at solving problems through his physical and mental prowess.

The Reacher novels have violent action, beautiful women, lovingly detailed weaponry, sexual encounters, macho confrontations, daring rescues, and James Bondian assaults on the bad guy’s lair. But they are much more than mere thrillers. They are a rarer and finer thing: classical detective stories.

Killing Floor (1997) introduced Jack Reacher in the first-person narrative format Child says comes naturally to him, though he uses the third person for its suspense-building advantages in most later novels. While having a late breakfast in a diner after a long walk in the rain from the highway to a small Georgia town, Reacher is arrested for murder. He stays mute while mentally grading the cops’ performance. Later, he treats the local detective to his first series of pointedly Sherlockian deductions: “I know you’re a Harvard postgrad, you’re divorced and you quit smoking in April.” He can explain it all, of course, and, in a situation somewhat reminiscent of John Ball’s *In the Heat of the Night*, he goes from wrongful arrestee to police consultant—except that here it’s a white detective advising a black local lawman.

Though one early review described Reacher as “creepily amoral” and decried the level of violence, most greeted the novel for the landmark it was. Tersely told, with a plethora of short sentence fragments, the novel includes a great Hitchcockian suspense scene in an airport baggage claim area, as well as a fairly clued puzzle plot, with an ingenious punctuation clue the Ellery Queen team would have loved. There is also a subtle Sherlockian parallel: Like Holmes, Reacher has an even smarter brother. Joe Reacher, similar to Mycroft Holmes, works in government and is unknown to the general public; but his accomplishments as a Treasury agent include getting rid of all American counterfeiting.

Some have fairly criticized this first outing for coincidences and plot lacunae; but with it all, Lee Child was a great mystery writer from the first. Later novels would be slicker, but this one must stand as one of the genre's best debuts.

Every Reacher novel has some measure of puzzles, but the success of Child's formula depends on combining elements. *Running Blind* (2000), fourth in the series, is his purest detective plot, but possibly his weakest novel. Reacher becomes an FBI consultant, part guest and part prisoner, helping in the search for a serial killer of former servicewomen who had won sexual harassment cases while in the military. The situation is as outré as anything in classical detective fiction: The killer leaves his victims naked in a bathtub covered with green paint. How he kills them, and how he comes and goes without leaving a trace, are unknown. Alert readers should guess the central element of the solution, one of the oldest chestnuts in the mystery writer's pantry.

Reacher's romantic dilemma, based on his brush with domesticity after inheriting a house and acquiring a girlfriend in *Tripwire* (1999), slows the action. Some of the conversations with his FBI handler reminded me (and not favorably) of Spenser and Susan Silverman in Robert B. Parker's novels. Yet, hard to swallow as it is, it's still entertaining and a genuine Golden-Age-style variation on the serial-killer story, including Reacher's version of Ellery Queen's challenge to the reader, presented before the final revelations: "We know everything we need to know. Some of it, we've known for days. But we screwed up everywhere. . . . Big mistakes and wrong assumptions."

Later books manage the mystery/thriller combination more successfully. Three outstanding examples are: *The Enemy* (2004), *The Affair* (2011), and *One Shot* (2005), which was made into a pretty good movie starring the vertically challenged but otherwise convincing Tom Cruise.

The current Jack Reacher novel, *Personal*, is another strong example of Child's specialty: applying the analytical technique of detective fiction to the practical problems of thriller fiction. In common with about a third of the novels, this one is written in first person, with a style that recalls the easy confidence of Donald Hamilton and John D. MacDonald.

Will the world-class sniper whose attempt on the French president was foiled only by the improved bulletproof glass in front of the podium next attack the G8 leaders meeting at a castle in England? The number of marksmen capable of such a job has been narrowed to 21 worldwide, of which all but 4 have airtight alibis: one American, one Israeli, one Briton, one Russian. Reacher's initial job is to find the American candidate, whom he was responsible for putting in a military prison for 15 years. When he meets the other possibilities (not yet knowing who is from which country) a touch of verisimilitude is created by contrasting reality with cinematic artifice. Reacher sizes up a candidate in a tan Burberry trenchcoat over a Savile Row suit with "English shoes the color of horse chestnuts, buffed up to a gleaming shine"—and concludes this has to be the Russian: "No Brit operative would dress that way, unless he was trying out for a part in a James Bond movie."

As usual, the Reacher equivalent of Ian Fleming's Bond girl is not just eye candy but a highly capable and resourceful professional, though State Department employee Casey Nice seems to be dependent on pills. The operation of her beat-up vehicle demonstrates Child's narrative gift:

> She rattled the selector into reverse, and all the mechanical parts inside called the roll and counted a quorum and set about deciding what to do. Which required a lengthy debate, apparently, because it was whole seconds before the truck lurched backward.

Child again recalls the earlier classics by surprising the reader with the ultimate solution and clearly explaining the generous clues that led there. In some stories, Reacher's deductions seem almost clairvoyant, or at least remarkably lucky, and the plots sometimes stretch credulity; but there is no more consistently entertaining writer on the mystery scene than Lee Child. And perennial bestseller though he is, he may be missing some of his potential audience: detective-story purists who revere the work of past masters like Christie, Queen, and John Dickson Carr. ♦

Tom Cruise in 'Jack Reacher' (2012)

PARAMOUNT PICTURES

“Defense secretary to resign: Hagel initiated talks with Obama”
—CNN.com, *November 24, 2014*

PARODY

OFFICE OF THE PRESS SECRETARY

TELEPHONE TRANSCRIPT
NOVEMBER 13, 2014, 4:24 PM

MR. HAGEL: Good afternoon, Mr. President. How can I help you?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Well, you called me, didn’t you?

MR. HAGEL: Actually, sir, your assistant connected us.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: She did? Oh. But didn’t you want to talk to me?

MR. HAGEL: I’m always happy to talk to you, Mr. President.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Great. I just want to be clear here. You’re telling me you are always happy to talk to me, yes?

MR. HAGEL: Yes, of course, sir. So—

PRESIDENT OBAMA: So it’s great that you want to talk to me! And technically I was not the person who called you first. It was my assistant. Not me, right?

MR. HAGEL: Um, yes. Is there something wrong, sir?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: No, no. I just want to make clear we are on the same page. By accepting my assistant’s call, you kind of initiated this talk. And now we are talking together.

MR. HAGEL: Yes, that is correct. We are talking together, although I am still not sure about what, sir.

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Terrific! I’m glad that’s all squared away. You know how pesky the press can be about people resigning versus getting fired.

MR. HAGEL: Excuse me, sir?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Oh. Didn’t you get Valerie’s email?

MR. HAGEL: The one about not smushing the little pillows on your couch?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: No, the other one. The subject, I think, is, “YOU’RE

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