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CLAREMONT

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A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

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MAKING WAR

by Angelo M. Codevilla

I THANK BRET STEPHENS FOR HIS KIND JUDGMENT on my new book, *Advice to War Presidents*, which he calls “bracing and intelligent” with “no shortage of wisdom and wit” (“Statecraft as Warcraft,” Summer 2009). But I notice he quotes from the text when describing how the book rescues the classic meaning of diplomacy, prestige, economic statecraft, war, intelligence, and internal security from the Alice-in-Wonderland mentality of post-Wilsonian American statesmen, but neglects to do so when asserting the book’s flaws. Instead, he takes issue with what he supposes to be some of my intentions. Since others may share those suppositions, let me now correct them.

Stephens writes that I overlook “positive instances of American statesmanship,” namely, that “the U.S. *did* manage to defeat Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, *did* manage to overcome the strain of the Vietnam War, *did* manage to bury the Soviet Union, *did* manage to out-compete Japan, Germany, and the European Union, and—it now seems—*will* manage a win in Iraq.”

On the contrary, I made clear that the defeat of Japan’s armed forces produced precisely the peace for which America had fought and that it did so because General Douglas MacArthur “kept Washington’s wise men and the Soviets at bay in Tokyo.” Just as clearly, I pointed out that crushing Germany’s armed forces produced a half-century of cold war, not peace, because Franklin Roosevelt’s wise men made elementary errors. “He placed America’s eggs in Stalin’s basket and kept them there after the danger had become the Soviet Union’s rise, not its fall.” Neither John Quincy Adams, Winston Churchill, nor Charles de Gaulle would have done such a thing (never mind Stalin). Nor would Thucydides or any textbook of diplomacy have counseled a misuse of alliances that led to the repudiation of original war aims (the Atlantic Charter was, after all, about Poland’s freedom) and, worst of all, domestic strife. One of diplomatic history’s most poignant passages is Roosevelt aide Harry Hopkins’s plea to Stalin (who spurned it) to put some fig leaf on his domination of Eastern Europe because it was causing strife between Americans who sup-

ported the president and others who supported freedom. That strife is with us still.

Dear as it is to conservatives, the notion that we “buried” the Soviet Union (other than as survivors) is unsupported by facts and logic. The notion appeals to me personally because Richard Pipes and I authored the part of the 1980 state department transition report that advocated making the Soviet Union’s end official U.S. policy—the only official U.S. document ever to do so. What’s more, between 1979 and 1984 I had a substantial role in developing the anti-missile weapons programs that became the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). But nothing any Americans did *caused* the Soviet collapse. Mikhail Gorbachev actually caused it, in the same sense that a hammer is the *efficient cause* that drives a nail into wood. Gorbachev, following Yuri Andropov, purged more Communist Party officials in five years than Stalin did in near thirty, in a vain attempt to recentralize an organization that had become feudal and unresponsive to the center. Meant to discredit his political enemies, *glasnost* and *perestroika* ended up discrediting the Party. Many have argued in general terms that Gorbachev waged these campaigns with deadly incompetence because Americans forced him to. But nobody has shown how the SDI program that drowned all weapons development in an interest group morass, or how the American government in which President Reagan and his CIA director William Casey were embattled outsiders and that supplied the Soviet economy with untied (and never repaid) loans, took hold of Gorbachev as a hand takes hold of a hammer and caused him to smash the system.

DOES IT NOW SEEM THAT WE “*WILL MANAGE* a win in Iraq?” My book deals with this matter at length. Beyond doubt now (and I never doubted it) is that Iraq will never again be a unitary state, much less a *democratic* unitary state. What used to be northern Iraq is Kurdistan—in army, flag, language, and race. Kurds are not Iraqis because they are not Arabs. Iraq’s west is ruled by Sunni sheiks, who represent one in four Iraqi Arabs. Armed and empowered by the American “surge,” they have

no intention of submitting to the Shia majority that rules Baghdad and the south.

It was clear in 1991 that Saddam Hussein’s ouster would lead to this tripartite division. Ousting Saddam was right and salutary because he had made himself the paladin of anti-Americanism in the region, if not in the world. Left to itself, post-Saddam Iraq would have sorted itself out. Competent policy would have dealt with the rump parts at arms’ length. But the tortured logic that accompanied the invasion led to an eight-year campaign meant to avoid precisely the sorting out that was unavoidable. I argue that the post-2003 occupation of Iraq is a textbook negation of sound policy: failure to adopt as an objective a notion of peace achievable with the means you are willing to use, failure to identify an enemy whose disappearance will give you that peace, and failure to kill that enemy and his allies quickly, wherever they may be. Instead, at the cost of 4,400 American lives and much more, the collective wisdom of our foreign policy establishment won what?

Stephens writes that I am “too dismissive of the power of American culture as an instrument of suasion or subversion.” My chapter on the role of ideas in international affairs is based on a critique of Joseph Nye’s *Soft Power* (2004). Nye’s contention was that the culture of people like himself—the official culture of Cambridge and Palo Alto; the *New York Times*; Washington, D.C.; Hollywood; and the Davos World Economic Forum—conquers all. I do not confuse that narrow, socially powerful but militarily impotent sect with America itself. Far from being irresistibly attractive, this culture is at odds with most of the rest of the world. I devote most of the chapter to describing truly powerful ideas—religion among them—of which this culture is ignorant, ideas that are familiar to the American culture that captivated me long before I immigrated to the United States, a culture that endures but no longer holds society’s commanding heights. The practical question is: who is attracted to what aspect of America, and so what?

Stephens takes heart that “not for nothing are shopping malls from Bangkok to Mexico City to Cairo just like American shopping

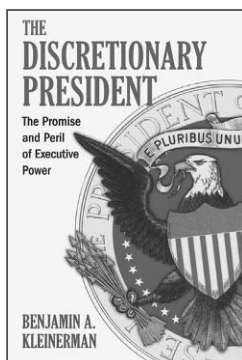


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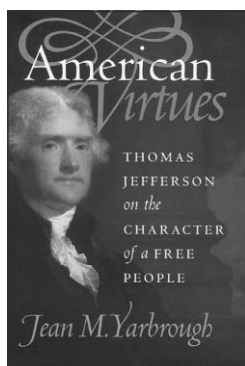
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mall.... Not for nothing has democratic governance been steadily expanding around the world.” Does he really mean that as foreigners adopt American technology, products, and some customs they become like us in important respects? There is in Dubai, I’m told, a huge American-style sports bar with flat-screen TVs, flowing beer, and pool tables. From a distance, the men and women who congregate there look like Americans enjoying the game. A closer look shows that the men are rich, middle-aged Arabs and the women are Russian call girls. Patronage of the bar by no means represents appreciation that “all men are created equal.” The bar is just another venue in which tribal prerogatives are exercised. Do drinking and whoring in what some imagine to be typically American ways disincite the patrons to fund their favorite terrorists? One of my book’s main points—and I claim no innovation here—is that democracy is not reducible to a single phenomenon, but that its character in any given instance depends on the character of particular peoples and particular regimes. The bare forms of democracy do not alter mentalities—loves and hates, proclivities and aversions—any more than shopping malls and sports bars do.

“Worse,” writes Stephens, “are Codevilla’s vituperative attacks on neoconservatism.” I was not aware that I had attacked neoconservatism, much less vituperatively. Since many call me a neocon, perhaps because I wrote most of *Commentary’s* articles on international affairs for a decade, it is not news to me that neoconservatives differ among themselves in sophistication as well as in opinion. For most neoconservatives, “spreading democracy” means empowering peoples and expecting that, once empowered, they will do well by themselves and by America. But as I wrote in my book, this means “losing sight of the high cultural and political obstacles” to such democracy and misunderstanding the instruments of statecraft, principally diplomacy and war. Though Max Boot, Joshua Muravchik, and Charles Krauthammer advocate fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, they mistakenly morph war into nation-building because they believe that reshaping troublesome peoples with military force will produce non-troublesome nations, and they believe that they know how to do what must be done to foreigners whom Rudyard Kipling characterized as “half devil and half child.” Indeed, these neoconservatives believe that the only choice is between flaccid diplomacy on one hand and, as Stephens has written elsewhere, “a winding and bloody struggle to defend and improve a hapless and often corrupt government in a godforsaken land.”

But no. My book shows that diplomacy, as winners have practiced it, conveys softly, unam-

biguously, at arms’ length, the reality of what one people will and will not stand for from another, and that when threats to vital interests call for war, the objective must be swiftly to kill those who embody the threats, and anyone who stands with them. If you don’t know whose death will rid you of your troubles, or don’t have what it takes to kill them, using force in “winding and bloody struggles” will only get you more troubles.

Angelo M. Codevilla is professor emeritus of international relations at Boston University.

MAKING THE GRADE

by Bret Stephens

ANGELO CODEVILLA CAN REST ASSURED I know just how he feels, or rather, how he has almost surely felt at one time or another in his academic career. What I have in mind are those unhappy occasions when a student came by his office, complaining about that B+ that really should have been an A–. Now it’s Codevilla’s turn to take that student’s place, explaining at length why my A– review of *Advice to War Presidents* really should have been an A+. As it is, Codevilla’s letter mainly serves to reinforce my original judgment of his book, particularly about his tendency to take his arguments a couple of steps too far. Nor is this some kind of big misunderstanding on my part, as he implies when he writes that my critical observations aren’t supported by quotations from his book. On the contrary, I believe I have understood him perfectly well.

Thus, regarding his objection to my claim that he overlooks “positive instances of American statesmanship”:

America’s armed forces won nearly all their battles, and America’s Soviet enemy died of its congenital disorders. But the American people found themselves ever less secure as our statesmen lost peace after peace.... Losing wars while winning battles is hard and rare. Yet American presidents and their advisers have managed to do just that for nearly a century.

And regarding his claim that he “was not aware that [he] had attacked neoconservatism, much less vituperatively,” here’s this: “Like other



Progressives, Neoconservatives loved America arguably less for itself than for what it could do for mankind.”

And this:

The triple-blind bet of Neoconservative diplomacy is that the people of any and every country would really like to imitate American democracy, that nothing in any people’s habits of mind and heart prevents them from doing so, and that its trying would be good for America.

And, again, this: “The essence of Neoconservative diplomacy is to use subversive words naturally fit for war as part of policies that envisage little if any unpleasantness.”

And so on.

Perhaps Codevilla and I just have different ideas of what is meant by the words “attack” and “vituperative.” Whatever the case, he gets neoconservatism wrong because he abstracts from what particular neocons have said at one time or another to make grand claims about the nature of a political tendency whose leading lights are much more sophisticated than Codevilla’s generalizations would suggest, and who frequently differ among themselves. For my part, I think the record shows that as democracy has spread in its Huntingtonian “waves,” the world has generally become a more secure place, for the obvious reason that democracies are less prone to resolve international differences through force. I also think that “spreading” democracy is a difficult but not impossible task, even in some of the world’s more benighted corners. And while I view “nation-building” with a certain amount of skepticism—especially when it comes to the fool’s gold of “development” via the usual aid agencies—I also think we have an interest in building and consolidating critical institutions of state, such as the army and police, in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq. Why? Not because it will yield great results, but because the alternatives all look considerably worse.

REGARDING CODEVILLA’S OTHER POINTS, let’s just say I don’t quite share his apparently boundless admiration for Douglas MacArthur, whose disastrous overconfidence in Korea as U.S. forces made for the Yalu River played its part in denying us an outright victory there. (On the other hand, the general’s record in transforming Japan from its previous rampant militarism to a prosperous and pacifist democracy does seem to offer something of a counterpoint to Codevilla’s culturalist infatuations.) I’m also not quite sure what Codevilla means about American war aims in World War II: I thought they were chiefly about winning

the unconditional surrender of the Axis Powers. And however we may both lament FDR’s naïveté about Joseph Stalin, it is not entirely clear to me how the Allies could plausibly have liberated Poland in 1945 from the clutches of Marshal Zhukov’s armies.

As for whether the U.S. can take credit for burying the Soviet Union, it is a fact that when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 the USSR was spending at least 20%, and perhaps as much as 40%, of its Gross Domestic Product on its war machine, as against about 6% of GDP that America was spending at the height of the Reagan arms buildup. Aristotelian distinctions between efficient, material, formal, and final causes aside, a fair argument can be made that the Reagan buildup was, at the least, a foot in the backside of an elephant already standing at the brink. Even if it weren’t, it also remains the fact that when the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991, it was “buried” by the U.S. in the same sense Krushchev meant when he predicted the Socialist camp would “bury” the West back in 1956.

WHAT ELSE? THERE IS CODEVILLA’S oddly self-assured claim that “beyond doubt now (and I never doubted it) is that Iraq will never again be a unitary state, much less a democratic unitary state.” And the evidence for this is? Right now, for the record, it is a democratic and unitary (albeit federal) state, Joe Biden’s (and Angelo Codevilla’s) expectations to the contrary notwithstanding. There is his equally odd certainty that “left to itself, post-Saddam Iraq would have sorted itself out.” But how does he know this? And how does he know that it wouldn’t have “sorted itself out” as three states, one dominated by Iran, another by al-Qaeda or a Baathist remnant, and a third by Turkey? There is hearsay evidence of drinking and whoring going on in the Port of Dubai. (And here I thought Codevilla was a sailor!) In all events, whoring and drinking represent a quantum cultural leap over the practices common to neighboring Saudi Arabia. Have I left something out? Oh, yes, the lament about the Davos set. But since I’m a sometime member of that set, I’ll recuse myself from comment.

Codevilla’s reply is a long one, so I hope the reader will forgive me if, rather than offer a rebuttal on every point, I simply refer him to my original review. And, since I’ve always admired and learned from his trenchant and frequently persuasive way of thinking, let me close by saying, at least where I come from, an A- really does mean a job well done.

Bret Stephens writes “Global View,” the foreign affairs column of the Wall Street Journal.

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