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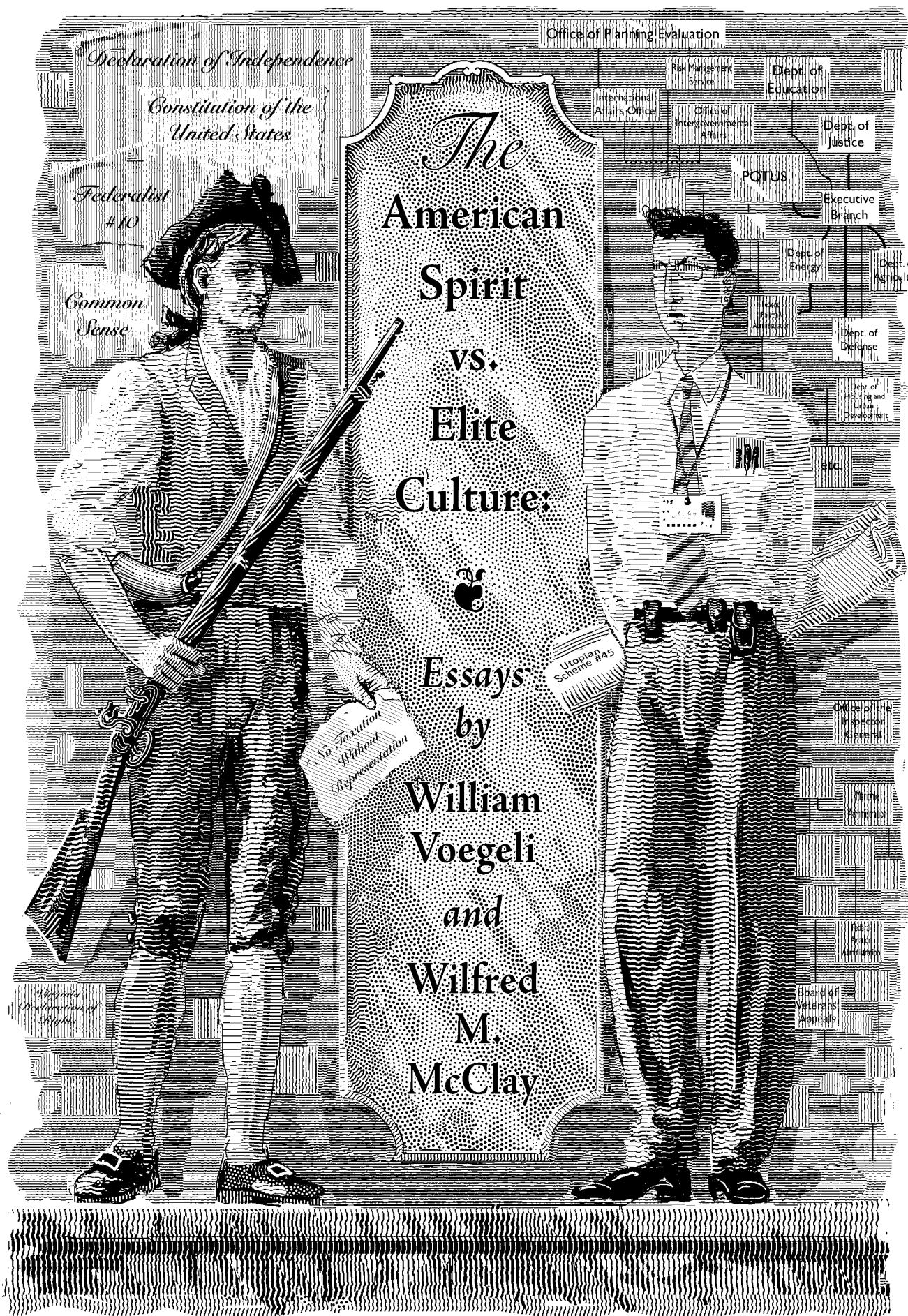
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PURE SON OF LIBERTY

The Peasant Prince: Thaddeus Kosciuszko and the Age of Revolution, by Alex Storozynski.
Thomas Dunne Books, 384 pages, \$29.95

THE POLISH-LITHUANIAN COMMONWEALTH and its native son, Thaddeus Kosciuszko, are little known today among American students of politics and history. But America's founders studied the one, alongside other examples of republican government, and they knew personally the other as a comrade in arms in the American Revolution. A new biography by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Alex Storozynski—*The Peasant Prince: Thaddeus Kosciuszko and the Age of Revolution*—shines some deserved light on both.

As one of Europe's home-grown experiments in ordered liberty, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was neither a great success nor an abject failure. Established in 1569, it survived more than two centuries surrounded by meddling and belligerent neighbors—no mean feat, as republics go. In his *Considerations on the Government of Poland*, written at the request of a reform-minded nobleman, Jean-Jacques Rousseau recognized its weaknesses. Yet he marveled both at the republic's longevity and vitality, and at the devotion of its nobles to their freedoms. He cautioned would-be reformers: "in thinking what you wish to gain, do not forget what you may lose." What they hoped to gain was a respite from anarchy and foreign interference that plagued the republic. What they stood to lose, according to Rousseau, was their liberty and the constitution that "has made you what you are."

At the height of its power in the 15th century, the Polish-Lithuanian Union (the alliance that preceded the Commonwealth) was unrivalled in Europe. Its lands extended from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Under the last king of the ruling dynasty, a federal republic was established, united under an elected monarchy with a parliament of elected representatives of the nobility. *Rex regnat et non gubernat* ("the King reigns but does not govern") was the guiding principle of the regime, according to Jan Zamoyski, a contemporary advisor to several kings.

The assertive nobility secured an expansive array of liberties for itself that were reaffirmed by each successive monarch prior to coronation. Rousseau credits this process with preventing the slide toward despotism manifested by other European powers. Nonetheless, by the 18th century it was widely recognized that the traditional rights of the gentry in this "noble's de-



mocracy" (the nobility constituted about 8% of the population—a remarkably broad franchise for the time) were being exploited by neighboring powers to paralyze the state.

"Too much liberty, not enough order" was a popular way of expressing the problem—an assessment shared by Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, who mention the Commonwealth in *The Federalist*. To them it was an example of a confederation "unfit for self-government and self-defense" due to its lack of a consolidated central government able to regulate relations between "local sovereigns." Madison called it "a mixture of aristocracy and of monarchy in their worst forms" and lamented that it had been "dignified" with the name of a republic.

Despite (some say, because of) reforms that, in 1791, produced Europe's first written constitution, the Commonwealth was ultimately subjugated and trisected by neighboring Austria, Prussia, and Russia. But not without a fight—a fight in which Kosciuszko played a heroic role, evincing the dedication to liberty that he had already shown in the American cause. Storozynski's book brings to life the struggle for freedom on two continents as experienced by this Lithuanian-Polish warrior and patriot. (Usually identified as a Pole, Kosciuszko was of Lithuanian and Ruthenian descent; his family's estate was in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.)

Kosciuszko trained at the Royal Military Academy in Warsaw. Barred as a foreigner from enrollment in French military academies, he studied military engineering privately in Paris. As a boy he had absorbed the curriculum taught by the Piarist Fathers, including lessons on John Locke and the classics which, according to Storozynski, were particularly influential in shaping his views. He had witnessed the oppression of serfs in his native Lithuania and had personally experienced the stigma of social inequality. Fleeing threats from a magnate who refused to let his daughter marry a low noble like Kosciuszko, he left Lithuania in 1775. Hearing of the rebellion of the American colonies, he was eager to test his military skills serving the ideals that had inspired it.

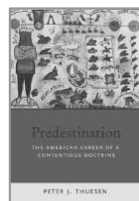
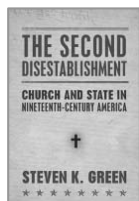
KOSCIUSZKO'S ARRIVAL IN NORTH AMERICA in the summer of 1776 was fittingly dramatic. His ship was smashed on the reefs off the coast of Martinique, and he had to swim to shore clutching the ship's mast. Making his way to Philadelphia, the young officer presented himself to Benjamin Franklin, who enlisted his engineering skills in developing defenses for the city. From there, he went on to play a key part at several important moments in the Revolutionary War—deploying effective diversionary tactics during the Northern Army's retreat from Ticonderoga, playing a pivotal role in drafting battle plans that led to victory at Saratoga, and designing the fortress at West Point.

Washington certainly came to know and appreciate the man (honoring his name with eleven different spellings in his correspondence: "Kosciuski," "Kosciusko," "Kosiusko," "Cosciusko," etc.). Toward the end of the war, en route to the Southern Army to which Washington had assigned him, Kosciuszko met Virginia Governor Thomas Jefferson. Storozynski recounts Kosciuszko's surprise when he learned "that the man who wrote that 'all men are created equal' owned slaves." The two became friends, and Kosciuszko pressed Jefferson to allow him to use his earnings from service in the Revolutionary War to buy, free, and educate Jefferson's slaves. But on this matter Jefferson proved evasive and, in the end, unwilling to indulge Kosciuszko.

With the war's conclusion, Kosciuszko was promoted to the rank of Brigadier General. Returning to Europe in 1784 to prevent



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foreclosure on his family’s estate, he found his country corrupt and utterly beholden to Russia. He joined the ranks of reformers advocating independence, greater social equality, a stronger central government with a standing army, and a more democratic constitution. “Kosciuszko saw the Polish reform movement as a continuation of the American Revolution, and hoped that it would not stop until all slaves, serfs, and oppressed peoples were treated as equals,” writes Storozynski. In 1789, Kosciuszko was commissioned to help train soldiers for a new Commonwealth army. Kosciuszko drafted a plan to create units drawn from all social classes, including peasants and Jews. But the magnates were no more willing to arm their peasants than American plantation owners had been to allow slaves to serve in the Continental Army, notes Storozynski.

Rousseau had warned would-be reformers against abrupt changes—to avoid “filling the republic with malcontents.” The new constitution of 1791, in retrospect, attempted too much, too fast—a consequence, in part, of the impatience of reformers who sought to take advantage of the preoccupation of surrounding powers with wars in other places. With the support of a confederacy of Polish and Lithuanian magnates, Russia invaded and occupied the country, dashing all hopes of renewal. Prussia reneged on its alliance with Poland, Austria allowed the Russians to use its territory, and the Commonwealth’s king, who had earlier made a show of supporting the new constitution, betrayed his troops, acceding to Russia’s demands. A dejected Kosciuszko resigned his position and left the country in 1792.

It was his return two years later to lead a national uprising that would make Kosciuszko a legend, and Storozynski recounts the tale in all its sad glory. Arriving in Krakow in March 1794, Kosciuszko appealed to soldiers, clergy, and citizens of all social classes to join the rebellion. Amazingly, his band of only a few thousand men, including hundreds of peasants armed with no more than scythes, defeated Russian forces at Raclawice. To commemorate their gallantry, Kosciuszko donned a peasant’s robe. The serfs cheered their “peasant prince.” In Warsaw, Polish guards defected from the army and raided the arsenal, handing out weapons to the townspeople. Soon Warsaw was in rebel hands, followed by Vilnius.

As Kosciuszko had hoped, peasants and Jews were joining the rebellion. Kosciuszko went further. He issued the Proclamation of Polaniec, which, essentially, freed the peasants. He was convinced this was not only just, but the surest way to enlarge his rebel army. But for the nobility and clergy, who depended on peasant labor for their livelihood, this was a step too far.

Meanwhile, though Kosciuszko had been at pains to reassure the upper classes that the rebellion would not devolve into French-style mob rule, a group of Jacobins began publicly executing traitors. Stern words from Kosciuszko put an end to the violence and the Jacobins were prosecuted. But this principled stance in favor of the rule of law alienated France, whose support Polish rebels had been seeking.

As in his first war with the Russians, Kosciuszko proved an adroit military leader, holding out for months as Prussian and Russian troops laid siege to Warsaw. But the arrival of enemy reinforcements sealed the rebels’ fate. Though hopelessly outmatched, he ordered his troops into battle, where they were defeated. He was severely injured and taken prisoner by the Russians who initially didn’t recognize him: he was wearing a peasant’s robe. By November the uprising was over.

READING STOROZYNSKI’S METICULOUSLY and extensively researched account, one cannot help being struck by Kosciuszko’s uncompromising dedication to freedom, equality, and justice. But this, his greatest strength, was also perhaps his greatest flaw—a notion Storozynski recognizes but does not dwell upon. Kosciuszko was, in Jefferson’s words, “as pure a son of liberty as I have ever known,” and this is what brought about his failure. The same purity of principles and purpose for which he is admired left him, like his country whose tragic fate he shared, unprepared to compromise for the sake of a better, if imperfect outcome.

His failure notwithstanding, Kosciuszko became an international celebrity and an inspiration in the Old and New World alike. Having won the respect of his captors, he was eventually freed and given a hero’s welcome wherever he went. For the rest of his life Kosciuszko never gave up his dream of restoring his country’s independence, making his case to Napoleon, Czar Alexander, and the Congress of Vienna. But his refusal to play politics left him empty-handed, and he never again came as close as he had in 1794.

Perhaps it is the peculiar reverence we Eastern Europeans have for the uncompromising, self-immolating hero, and our admiration for the principles he lived by that inclines us to be forgiving of men like Kosciuszko. It is hard to wish for him to have been other than what he was. We wish, instead, for a world in which such courage and idealism are better rewarded.

Darius Udrys is a U.S. correspondent for Lithuanian State Radio and development manager at the Center for Civic Education, a non-profit organization that promotes education for democracy in the United States and 80 other countries.

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