It’s hard to clarify human greatness, especially amid today’s reductionist psychologies and theories of equal concern and respect. Welcome to Tod Lindberg’s stimulating new book, then, which returns to fresh experiences and sets out a comprehensive inquiry.

*The Heroic Heart* calls our attention from the start to self-evident examples, such as the heroism of Lindberg’s wife’s uncle, a patrolman who risked his life to rescue a child from a burning home. But the book is no simple exhortation. A research fellow at the Hoover Institution, Lindberg seeks to clarify greatness in general and the version that befits democracies of equal rights, in particular. And his whole argument is shadowed by Friedrich Nietzsche’s indictment of democratic mediocrity.

The book is subtitled *Greatness Ancient and Modern*, and it seeks to chronicle a historical transition from one to the other. The ancients’ “slaying hero,” preoccupied with his own greatness, has been replaced by the modern “saving hero,” who sacrifices self to save others. Both types risk their lives. Risking one’s life is Lindberg’s mark of a hero. But the ancient type, callous about others in general, seeks deeds worthy of his or her sense of inner greatness. Homer’s Achilles is Lindberg’s characteristic example. The modern type, a humanitarian, sacrifices himself to preserve others, even strangers—as Doctors Without Borders do, for example. We get a roughly chronological movement of chapters, from the self-fulfilling hero to the “generous.” We get a correspondingly rich spread of thumbnail sketches, ranging from Achilles, Gilgamesh, and Cicero’s bloody defense of his republic, to the sacrifice of Jesus, Thomas Carlyle’s volumes on heroism, and the New York City firefighters on 9/11. No short review can do justice to these many portraits. Nevertheless, the recurring measure, the touchstone, is the heroism of modern police, firemen, and military personnel. Lindberg on the self-understanding of Medal of Honor recipients, so different from the victimhood that postmodern intellectuals impute, is itself worth the price of admission.

The author’s purpose is moral, or rather moral-political, and certainly not merely historical. Against what he fears is the grain of our thinking, Lindberg teaches an appreciation of modern heroism. Don’t let fashionable theories blind us, he warns. Look about. We benefit from governments of law at home and of “democratic peace” abroad. Bred to customary equality, Western peoples regard themselves as a community of “likes” (as Facebook has taught us to say), not as warring classes of subjects, serfs, nobles, and despots. Nor are we smothered among soft bourgeois sheep, as alleged by Ernst Jünger and other semi-Nietzschean promoters of a “vestigial heroism.” Admittedly, World War I’s bloodbath produced a revulsion from warrior glory, and something of this overreaction continues in the “anti-hero” culture. (Lindberg’s sympathetic description of the Vietnam Memorial is another gem). But we need no resuscitations like Carlyle’s 19th-century “men of ideas,” which slighted the risk at the core of heroism and was already alien to an increasingly democratic age. Look about now.
We have Medal of Honor recipients perfectly capable of heroic deeds, whom we increasingly honor for saving their buddies rather than for destroying the enemy. Western military interventions are often to save victims of disasters, or to protect from conquests rather than to extend one’s own territory. In short, today’s heroes are of a “higher type,” with unprecedented “generosity” and a “caring will” extended to strangers and even to all of humanity. Their caring is “universal,” reflecting something “primal” in this talking animal and culminating in the model of a supremely self-sacrificing Christ. One of Lindberg’s earlier books located in The Political Teachings of Jesus (2007) the origin of modern “freedom and equality.” In a similar vein The Heroic Heart presents modern history as a necessary product of developing political constraints but also, perhaps, as a providential “bequest.”

Modern heroes so construed punch above their weight—that is, they signify more than their particular deeds because they fill a moral “void.” They counter an enervating relativism that holds nothing worthy or superior. They thus save democracy from Nietzsche’s indictment. While our “egalitarian” politics of universal rights protects the “quiet life,” Lindberg worries, it fails in guiding us toward a worthy life. It satisfies bourgeois desires for “safety, comfort and pleasure,” which people commonly and naturally want, but it fails in distinguishing “good” from “bad” desires. The modern hero shows to democracy the self-sacrificing life, the life moral and good rather than aimless. The saving hero is a model in protecting others and, at his peak, in protecting the democratic order itself, especially against a return of the slaying hero. A Hitler or Osama bin Laden is eternally possible abroad, as is a charismatic demagogue at home. Lindberg’s book concludes with the obstacles to a successful saving of liberal democracy. The chief obstacle is internal decay, and the crucial decay would be a gradual abandonment of the “classical liberal principles” that supply modernity its “dynamism.”

Lindberg’s recurrence to heroism points to a virtually undeniable oasis in today’s artificially bleak intellectual landscape. But if one indeed looks about, does his argument encompass our experience of human greatness in general? I think not. The very identification of greatness with heroism slights other undeniable forms of greatness. The heroic fireman is great. So, however, is the fire chief who trains and organizes his men for the most success with the least risk. So, too, the great general. During the American Revolution, General George Washington on his white horse refrained from risking his life, except at battles such as Trenton and Princeton where independence hung by a thread and depended on victory. Washington would have been a blameworthy fool to risk loss of the indispensable commander and resolute upholder of a fragile republic. The hero’s precise virtue is courage, in extraordinary and admirable degree, but in particular circumstances involving this fight or that buddy. Courage as virtue, admirable as it is, pales before the greatness of soul and judgment that can overcome whole enemy armies and navies.

Actually, willingness to risk one’s life seems not an adequate mark of even the hero. Contemptible gangsters and rash youngsters willingly risk their lives. The hero in a precise sense must aim for some just or admirable goal, some deed right or good that takes great effort and thus sacrifice, including in extreme cases the supreme sacrifice. Achilles risking his life on a wild rampage to show his greatness against friend as well as enemy was no hero; Achilles risking his life to defend the Achaeans, or to roll up their enemies, seemed a hero.
Also, what of the many forms of obvious greatness not involving politics, heroism, or defense of one’s country? If greatness emanates from heroism alone, if it essentially involves risking life, how describe the admirable stature of a Hawthorne or Shakespeare, a Mozart or Arthur Rubinstein, a Thucydides or Tacitus, this architect or that?

On similar grounds it seems arbitrary to narrow ancient greatness to the province of Achilles, Gilgamesh, and other bloody warriors and despot. Why exclude famous republican statesmen and generals, such as Pericles of Athens and Brasidas of Sparta, who were not without concern for others? The remarkable philosopher-general Xenophon, of the Anabasis, saved a Greek army of ten thousand. There is much evidence against the supposition that the emblematic ancients were decisively without reasonable justice, even if they were not compassionate humanitarians. Lindberg goes so far in this direction as to take Machiavelli’s prince as an authoritative description of ancient greatness. What of The Prince’s anti-moral pronouncement, precisely against previous “writers,” that a prince must disdain “what should be done,” not least generosity, in favor of “what men do,” that is, in favor of safety, wealth, and glory? Lindberg attributes to ancient greatness the alleged realism and real anti-morality that Machiavelli bequeaths to Thomas Hobbes, Friedrich Nietzsche, and other hardheaded modern thinkers.

But even Homer’s Achilles is not the “slaying hero,” without care for most other human beings, that Lindberg describes. Achilles’ rampage against the Trojans is spurred by disillusionment with justice. He, king of the Myrmidons, had fought on behalf of Agamemnon’s Argives for long years, only to find himself a mere tool of lesser men and without due regard for his saving greatness. One could learn something about the exploitative reaction of superior men exploited by the lesser “others” they protect. Besides, Achilles in Hades comes eventually to doubt his pursuit of greatness. Losing one’s life may not be worth it. Achilles is more thoughtful, more rational, more doubting of heroism, than Lindberg’s sketch suggests. And the author Homer raises his own doubts about his wrathful hero. Lindberg could attend more to such authorial appraisals. Thucydides in his so-called History, Xenophon in the Anabasis and Cyropae-
dia, and others of the ancient writers discuss thematically the various types of would-be greatness, Greek and non-Greek. One cannot speak so simply of “ancient greatness,” especially as Machiavellian.

Lindberg’s tacit disparagement of republican statesmen seems particularly counterproductive, given his concern for our democracies. Liberal democracies rest on a plan (“classical liberal principles”); great statesmen work to establish and protect some version of the plan; reverence for founders and statesmen helps preserve their work. This does not come through in this book. The opposite comes through, what with the focus on ordinary heroes, a supposition of obsolescence, and a Machiavellian psychology of the strong. While The Heroic Heart mentions generals Washington and Dwight Eisenhower, its theme is how their self-centeredness became other-directed through popular pressures or retrospective popular reputation. Thomas Jefferson appears with the counterculture’s feet of clay—as the slave-owner and abuser of Sally Hemings. Though Abraham Lincoln would save the Union, his reputation as saving hero and martyr-president originated with the assassination, which had little to do with the war’s outcome. James Madison, Franklin Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, etc., do not appear. Better, for Lindberg’s own purposes, the judiciously patriotic David McCullough on Harry Truman, Harry Jaffa and James McPherson on Lincoln—and, yes, Lin-Manuel Miranda on Alexander Hamilton!

It seems counterproductive, too, to understand modern peoples generally as wanting merely “quiet,” in radical contradistinction to the “higher” saving heroes who protect them. Is safety, comfort, pleasure truly enough for most people, at least most decent people? Consider their care of children and their intuitions, reasonable or not, of right rather than wrong, high rather than low, and the divine rather than the impious. What of the obvious possibilities of citizen education and religious education? Would not such a divide between resentful sluggards and caring heroes exacerbate an already growing gulf between a caring state and majorities conceived as dependent victims? Better to learn from the pre-modern psychologies and to follow the old constitutional (and Lockeian) path of equal opportu-
nity. Universal rights, indeed, but a version that blends the enterprising with the industrious and fosters self-reliance and thus a spirit of freedom. Yes, enlightened safety, comfort, and pleasure, but for the most part through one’s own efforts. Modern middle classes, too, need duties, virtues, accomplishments, and justifiable pride, as well as rights.

Lindberg’s practical thinking is hindered by his turn to Hobbes as authority for classical liberal principles. Hobbes was seminal as to equal rights, narrowed psychology, and sovereign government, but he also insisted on absolute sovereignty, state religion, and monarchy. Lindberg never mentions John Locke or Montesquieu. It was they, however, who showed how to combine equal rights with free society, religious toleration, growing wealth and power, and government limited, constitutional, and popular. Lindberg’s priority of “quiet life” reminds one of Hobbes’s priority of “peace.” But Hobbes had no space for heroism or human greatness and left a very insecure space for the “freedom” and “dynamism” that Lindberg would protect and that Locke’s natural right to the fruits of one’s labor promotes. For similar reasons, Locke would not speak of equal rights as “egalitarian” and of popular government as simply “democratic.” In such a country firemen, policemen, and other potential heroes need not be expected to act solely for others and for what is right. They act also for a community that is their own and benefits them accordingly, if not equally. They too should participate as fellow citizens and contributors in a humane country, not merely as idealists in an amorphous and distant humanity.

Tod Lindberg has been considering his heroes, those he looks up to, “all my life,” he writes. That shows in his book’s warm anecdotes going back to his parents, the appreciation of admirable souls, the frank and yet finished prose, the frank and yet finished prose, and the unorthodox yet extended investigations. One may question the full adequacy of this or that thesis, characterization, or definition, but one cannot doubt that Lindberg’s is a book about great hearts from the heart.

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