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TWO TRUTHS ABOUT ABORTION

PETER STEINFELS

WILLIAM PFAFF ON NORTH KOREA

DAVID RIEFF ON SYRIA

ROBIN DARLING YOUNG ON PETER BROWN

RICHARD ALLEVA ON 'GATSBY'

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Cover image: Detail of *Views of a Fetus in the Womb*, a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci, c. 1510–12

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LETTERS

Faith & physics, hope in Boston

BACK TO GOD

Regarding "Nagel's Untimely Idea" (May 17): Rather than use theism to explain consciousness, I've found it helpful to use consciousness to explain theism. As one who lost the faith of my childhood, I set out to regain it. So I needed a plausible explanation of God that did not depend on magic and mysticism. I started with the human brain, which is just a more advanced version of my cat's brain. The brain is the source of consciousness. From what we can deduce, consciousness is organized bioelectrical energy. No, we have not yet figured out how this organized bioelectrical energy produces sentience, nor have we discovered precisely how to arrest the process of aging. But one day we will understand the secrets to both, and probably sooner rather than later.

In that respect, I agree with the views of Kenneth R. Miller, one of the three respondents to Thomas Nagel's *Mind and Cosmos*. Human intelligence is astonishing, yet that intelligence emanates from the bioelectrical interactions between neurons contained in a structure the size of a loaf of bread. Imagine a brain as big as the earth, or even the universe. What is the nature of dark energy—most of the energy in the universe? If the multiverse theory is true, what about other universes, with different laws of physics, that don't even permit the formation of matter, but that do permit the formation of other forms of energy? Imagine the comparative omnipotence and omniscience of organized energy within such a universe. It cannot be asserted that God can be explained by some variation on this theme, but for me it is at least plausible. And that was enough to start me on a journey of spiritual renewal, which led to my receipt of the sacrament of confirmation as a Roman Catholic this past Pentecost Sunday. At this point, it doesn't matter whether or not my speculative hypothesis concerning a nonsupernatural deity has even a modicum of validity. I just needed a kick start, and that's what did it for me.

LARRY WEISENTHAL
Huntington Beach, Calif.

BOSTON'S BRAVERY

I find Luke Hill's analysis of the Archdiocese of Boston's reconfiguration ("The Big Dig," June 1) consistent with my own experience living there over the past two years. I recently returned to my home in Atlanta filled with deep love and admiration for the people of Boston, especially the priests serving the parishes and the Catholics who attend Mass every Sunday. I found the priests caring, wise, and courageous. The people's faith in God and their love of the church is reassuring and inspiring. I was particularly struck by parents and children involved with religious education and youth programs who proudly celebrated First Communion and Confirmation. In a time when 85 percent of Catholics don't practice their faith, these young people provide a glimmer of hope.

I have loudly advocated for putting effort into the New Evangelization. And I'm happy to read that others share my belief that the New Evangelization, in Boston and elsewhere, must begin by recognizing, honoring, celebrating, and loving both the people in the pews and those at the altar, those who still find God's love and mercy most present in the church. They are the future of Catholicism. As grim as things may seem, I'm not sure that we fully comprehend the seismic changes occurring in the church in Boston, and in many parts of the country. There are no quick, painless, certain solutions. My fervent prayer is for God to bless and strengthen these beloved people.

(REV.) THOMAS SHULER
Atlanta, Ga.

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ARTICLE

SHORT TAKES

A street in Harasta, a suburb of Damascus

CNS PHOTO / SANA VIA REUTERS

UPFRONT

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THE LAST WORD

SURVEY SAYS

From the dotCommonweal post "New Missal Survey Shows Most Priests Dissatisfied," by Rita Ferrone:

The closer you get, the worse it looks.

That seems to be the takeaway from a survey conducted over the past year intended to gauge Catholics' response to the new English translation of the Roman Missal. The controversial translation had its debut at the end of 2011 amid doubts of its ability to gain wide appeal. "Give it a chance," its advocates advised, "you'll get used to it." A year later, a CARA survey reported that 70 percent of U.S. lay Catholics agreed with the statement "The new translation is a good thing." Yet online polls conducted around the same time revealed a more troubling picture, showing considerably more negative opinion, especially among priests, who use the Missal every day.

Cardinal Francis George blesses copies of the new Missal translation.

A *Tablet* of London survey found that clergy gave the new translation very negative marks. Of the 1,189 clergy who participated, 70 percent were unhappy with the translation and wanted it to be revised. *U.S. Catholic* polled more than 1,200 priests in a reader survey, and found that 58 percent agreed with the statement "I dislike the new translations and still can't believe I'll have to use them for the foreseeable future." About half of lay Catholics polled registered unhappiness with the new Missal; just 17 percent said they enjoy it more than the old one. Some take the *Tablet* and *U.S. Catholic* surveys with a grain of salt. Yes, they indicate dissatisfaction, and especially strong dissatisfaction among clergy, but how reliable are their polls?

A new study out of St. John's University Collegeville helps clarify matters. It is narrowly focused on the opinion of priests in the United States, who, according to the data, are sharply divided on the question, with a clear majority disliking the new translation. The findings are striking. Almost 60 percent of priests do not like the new Missal, compared with 39 percent who do. An overwhelming 80 percent agree that some of the language is awkward and distracting. And 61 percent think the Missal must be revised with urgency. The same number of priests don't want the rest of the liturgical books to be translated in the same manner. The process of retranslating the Liturgy of the Hours and the rites of the sacraments is currently underway.

All 178 U.S. Latin Rite dioceses were invited to participate. Of those, thirty-two from all geographical regions of the country took part. A total of 1,536 priests (diocesan and religious) responded—a response rate of 42.5 percent.

Fr. Michael Ryan of Seattle, founder of the website What if We Just Said Wait?, noted that the proportion of discontent revealed in the new survey contrasts sharply with reactions to the introduction of English in the Mass following Vatican II. "These results are a far cry from the way priests and people reacted when the Mass in English was first introduced in the late 1960s," Ryan said. "A survey taken at that time indicated that 85 to 87 percent of Catholics ('and especially parish priests') preferred the new Mass to the old (Mark Massa, SJ, *Worship*, 81 [2007], p. 122)."

A bias against the texts would not account for another interesting finding: of those who had looked forward to the new Missal, 15 percent ended up disliking it. By comparison, just 10 percent grew to like it after using it. Two questions about process, unique to this survey, had sobering results. More than half the respondents are not confident that priests' views of the translation will be taken seriously. And nearly half do not approve of the role of the Holy See in bringing the new translation about, compared with 39 percent who do.

Fr. Edward Foley, professor at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, said, "The most disappointing result of this survey for me is that most priests doubt that their views about the translation will be seriously addressed; on the other hand, this too is not surprising since they were never consulted in the first place." Peter Jeffery, professor of medieval studies and theology at Notre Dame, asked: "Why did 82.1 percent of dioceses decide not to forward this survey to their priests? Do they think it is better not to know what priests think?" Msgr. Andrew Wadsworth, executive director of ICEL, questioned the representative value of the responses, pointing out that respondents constitute less than 3.7 percent of U.S. priests. Yet without some evidence of selection bias, the sample size does not indicate that the survey is weak.

For those priests who are well satisfied with the new translation, its daily use has been rewarding. For the majority, however, it has been a burden and a source of discouragement. On a deeper level, the conflict they experience has serious ramifications. As Fr. Anthony Cutcher, president of the National Federation of Priests Councils, observed: "The eucharistic liturgy and the ability to celebrate it well is at the core of a priest's identity.... With the promulgation of the Third Roman Missal, we priests have been placed in an untenable position, forced to choose between fidelity to the magisterium and feeding our people."

When a majority of priests are unhappy about something as important as the Missal, the situation calls for creative leadership and constructive responses. It is not clear, however, whether those in positions of authority are either ready or willing to respond. ■

CNS PHOTO / KAREN CALLAWAY, CATHOLIC NEW WORLD

From the Editors

Rotten

Although tax evasion is a serious crime in the United States, many of this country's business leaders, along with some of its politicians, seem to consider tax *avoidance* to be as American as Apple Inc. In their view, U.S. corporations, like U.S. citizens, should do whatever they legally can to shelter their hard-earned money from the IRS. Corporations are much better at this than the average individual taxpayer, partly because they can afford to spend more on accountants and lawyers and partly because our tax code makes it so easy to stash corporate earnings in countries with lower tax rates.

The polite term for this practice is "tax arbitrage," and according to congressional investigators, Apple has been especially good at it. Even though the official corporate-tax rate is 35 percent, Apple seems to be paying no more than 10 percent of its income in taxes. The technology company has avoided paying U.S. taxes on its overseas income by incorporating a shell company in Ireland, where it negotiated a tax rate of just 2 percent. Because the Irish government taxes companies only if they're managed in Ireland, while the IRS taxes them only if they're incorporated in the United States, another of Apple's Irish subsidiaries got away with paying no taxes at all on $30 billion of income between 2009 and 2012.

Of course, Apple isn't alone. In September of last year the Senate's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations issued a report on similar practices by Microsoft and Hewlett-Packard. Other multinational corporations, including Amazon and Google, have been accused of gaming the tax laws in Europe. Starbucks, for example, came up with a way not to pay any taxes in Great Britain, despite sales of $1.9 billion over the past three years. (After a consumer boycott, the company offered the British government $32 million.) When it was reported that General Electric had managed to pay nothing in federal taxes back in 2010, the news was met with appropriate outrage. But how many Americans know that twenty-five other big U.S. companies, including Boeing, Mattel, and Verizon, paid nothing in taxes between 2008 and 2011?

The smaller the share of federal taxes paid by corporations, the larger the share paid by workers. Individual income and payroll taxes now account for more than 80 percent of total federal revenue—up from roughly half sixty years ago. By shifting the tax burden from capital to labor, corporate tax-dodgers contribute to the country's growing inequality. They also hurt the government's balance sheet. As the *New York Times* has pointed out, if all the money corporations have squirreled away in offshore tax havens were taxed at the full 35-percent rate, the U.S. government would have enough revenue to pay for half the spending that has been automatically cut by the sequester.

At a Senate hearing on Apple's tax strategy, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) described it as "an egregious and really outrageous scheme." Apple's chief executive, Timothy D. Cook, suggested it was a matter of perspective: "I see this differently than you do, I believe. Honestly speaking, I don't see it as being unfair." Cook claimed that his company had paid every penny it owed, and that the fault, if there was one, lay with an anachronistic tax code that couldn't keep up with a digital economy. Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ken.) jumped to Apple's defense: "I say instead of Apple executives, we should have brought in here a giant mirror, OK? So we could look at the reflection of Congress, because this problem has been created by this awful tax code."

Paul and Cook are right: the corporate-tax code does need to be reformed—not relaxed in order to protect Apple's profits or advance Paul's ideology, but simplified and strengthened. There should be fewer loopholes and deductions, as well as more incentives to hire American workers and pay them properly. Products that are developed in this country should also be taxed here, not in whatever jurisdiction offers the lowest rate. International trade agreements should be better coordinated with agreements on tax law to make it harder for corporations to play one country off against another. At the very least, Congress should set a minimum tax rate for U.S.-based multinationals; companies that pay other governments below that rate would have to make up the difference to ours.

But if the tax code needs to change, so does America's business culture. Too many people at the helm of large corporations conceive of their fiduciary responsibilites to shareholders as an excuse to ignore their civic responsibilities. Too many think of their fellow citizens as nothing more than potential customers or investors. As another Apple executive put it last year, "We don't have an obligation to solve America's problems. Our only obligation is making the best product possible." That insular mindset, now as common in Silicon Valley as on Wall Street, is itself one of America's problems. It needs to change. Whether or not they acknowledge it, America's business leaders owe a debt to the country that made their success possible. Lawmakers aren't the only ones who need to look in the mirror. ■

Margaret O'Brien Steinfels

Stepping into the Vacuum

KENNETH FEINBERG'S NEXT CHALLENGE

Washington, D.C., has been worse than it is now, more chaotic and shameless: in addition to the perennial financial scandals, there also used to be duels and fistfights. Today bribery still flourishes in the form of campaign donations, and political knavery continues in the form of doctored e-mails. But, fortunately or not, the current members of Congress (and their staffs) are too hair-sprayed and cosseted to actually beat their opponents as Preston Brooks did Charles Sumner in 1856. On the other hand, the Republicans are not too high-minded to hold yet another hearing on why someone didn't rescue Ambassador Christopher Stevens last September in Benghazi.

In the meantime, let us again admire a public servant who knows what he's doing, a man who demonstrates that justice and common sense are still coordinates in the national psyche. Kenneth Feinberg is serving as Special Master for the One Fund Boston, which will offer compensation to those who were hurt or lost a loved one in the Boston Marathon bombing on April 15. The Fund has $30 million dollars in contributions and awaits the proceeds of 50,000 pledges. Early in May, a few weeks after the bombings, Feinberg explained his plan to survivors who could make it to a meeting at the Boston Public Library. He spoke with a certain grim practicality about the hard details of divvying up what could be a small pie. "If you had a billion dollars you could not have enough money to deal with all of the problems," he said. Feinberg would know, having disbursed $7 billion to over five thousand people after 9/11—both surviving victims and families of those who died. He will meet personally with the Boston victims in mid-June and has promised that checks will be sent out by June 30.

Feinberg is an exemplary public servant, not because he's ever been elected to office or reduced the federal deficit, but because he genuinely serves the public—above all, those men, women, and children who have suffered an unexpected and dreadful tragedy. To the rest of us he offers the assurance that a fair-minded arbiter has done his level best to ease the burdens of victims with funds provided by taxpayers, donors, or corporations, and to deny compensation to those who have not filed a legitimate claim. (There were over four hundred thousand illegitimate claims in the wake of the BP oil spill, whose compensation fund Feinberg also administered).

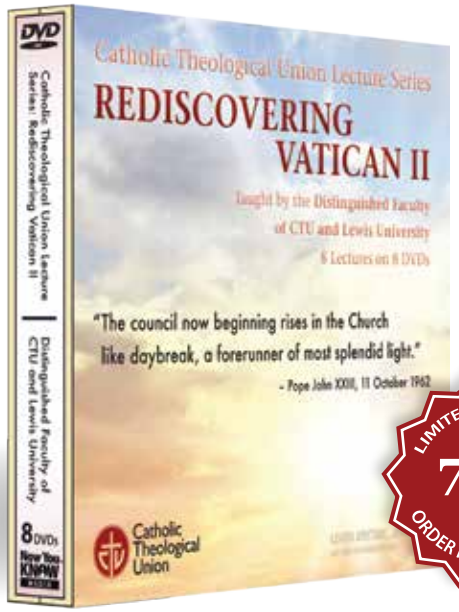
I wrote a column about Feinberg last year ("The Appraisal Czar," December 7, 2012) when his book *Who Gets What* appeared. There he discusses five cases where he devised compensation plans for tragedies that fell outside the normal course of events and killed or injured many people. In those cases, court proceedings would have delayed or diluted compensation. Those disasters elicited an outpouring of public sympathy and contributions. As with the earlier 9/11 settlement, Feinberg was called in to decide who would and who would not be awarded compensation and what levels of payment would be made for different kinds of injury and loss. Despite the cold calculations required to reach those judgments, Feinberg's kindness has made him the man to turn to in these difficult cases. Alan Nevas, a retired federal judge and chairman of the committee handling funds for shooting victims in Newtown, Connecticut, summed up Feinberg's reputation: "People just trust him."

Boston, April 15, 2013

CNS PHOTO / DAN LAMPARIELLO, EXCLUSIVE TO REUTERS

Feinberg has earned that trust. In an earlier book, *What Is Life Worth?*, his account of the 9/11 compensation program, two facts emerge. First, he gave victims an honest and realistic assessment of how much they were likely to receive: those in like circumstances received like amounts and appeals for special consideration were turned down. Second, he met with any victim or family who wanted to meet with him, whether to share their grief or to plead for more money. At times, he wrote, the heartbreak overwhelmed the proceedings: "We would all sit there, staring at the gaping human vacuum created by an untimely and totally unexpected death." His plainspoken assessment of what people were likely to be awarded showed his fairness; his patient readiness to listen to what the same people had to say about what had happened to them showed his compassion. He understood the demands for larger awards not as greed, but grief: "valuing a lost loved one—a life that won't be fulfilled, a future that will never be realized."

When he's done in Boston, he will move on to Newtown, where the Sandy Hook school shooting left twenty children and six adults dead. No doubt, Feinberg, meeting with the survivors, will stare "at the gaping human vacuum created" by so very many untimely deaths and provide not only compensation but also solace. ■



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William Pfaff

The Paradox of Proliferation

WHY NUKES ARE OF NO REAL USE TO NORTH KOREA

No one was surprised when North Korea's new supreme leader threatened to use nuclear weapons against the United States—it's hardly news when North Korea rattles its saber—but Kim Jong-un's belligerent rhetoric goes further than his predecessor's. He remains an unknown, unpredictable figure. Perhaps he's acting out of youthful inexperience, or maybe he believes he must demonstrate "credibility" to the Pyongyang military and to the government he leads. Whatever the case, he has been making the world nervous.

Kim Jong-un's gestures follow a series of North Korean missile and nuclear tests (some of them failures) over the past decade and a half. The latest missile test was of a vehicle implausibly touted as capable of reaching the continental United States. There seems little question that the weapon could reach Taiwan, Japan, and some U.S. bases in the Pacific, but Western arms specialists doubt it could do so carrying a nuclear warhead. That's why many people in Western military circles take these new threats as another bluff, intended to extract concessions from South Korea and the United States.

After all, that has worked before. In 1998, North Korea demonstrated the ability to launch a satellite, and two years later Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited Pyongyang, a meeting that accomplished little more than elevating North Korea's diplomatic status. The country raised its status further when it successfully tested nuclear devices in 2006, 2009, and February of this year.

It's been assumed that those devices were not weapons, which are far more sophisticated than test explosives. But in March the Pyongyang government pronounced itself a "nuclear power," and Kim Jong-un announced to the Central Committee of the Korean Workers Party that nuclear weapons were "a treasure" he would not trade for any Western concession—nor would he renounce them in any disarmament agreement.

The youth and inexperience of Kim Jong-un are concerns not only to Seoul, Beijing, and Washington but also to older members of his government, representing the generation of his father, Kim Jong-il (ca. 1941–2011). There has been Western speculation that North Korea's military, as well as members of the young Kim's family, consider their "dear leader" irresponsible—and replaceable.

Even if Kim Jong-un were so deranged as to order an attack on one of North Korea's enemies, that doesn't mean the order would be carried out. One man is powerless to launch such an attack. It would require the collaboration of hundreds of people in the military, and political echelons of the government that shared or were compelled to accept his delusions. A government does not launch a nuclear attack without the collaboration of political, technical, and military personnel; a president's or supreme leader's whim

CNS PHOTO / KCNA VIA REUTERS

Kim Jong-il, right, and his son Kim Jong-un, second from left, salute a military parade in Pyongyang in 2011.

is not enough. Such an attack would be sure to result in equivalent retaliation.

Nuclear weapons have no real utility to a state like North Korea other than as deterrence of attack or invasion. The threat of their successful development is a propaganda asset, whether valid or not. A North Korean attack on the United States, Taiwan, or South Korea would either provoke an immediate overturn of the North Korean regime or a devastating counterattack. The significance of nuclear weapons is primarily political and symbolic. They have no real value except within the circumstances of some great war whose principal actors intend the extinction of their enemy at the cost of their own existence. We have yet to encounter such a situation.

Short of that, the possible consequences of a nuclear attack are of such scope and unpredictability that all the actors in such an affair have weighty reasons to draw back from any step likely to precipitate that kind of crisis. Because nuclear weapons, in practical political and strategic terms, are unusable power, they illustrate the paradox of proliferation. The world in which every nation has nuclear weapons is in theory safe from nuclear war, although it is not safe from conventional attack.

American nonproliferation policy has always been to maintain an American quasi-monopoly on nuclear weapons. The UN Security Council was initially composed of the winners of World War II, and it was tacitly (if reluctantly) accepted in Washington that all its major allies either initially possessed the capacity to make such weapons (the United States and Britain) or the determination to do so, in order to reinforce their position as leading powers. So Russia, France, and China could not legitimately be denied nuclear military power. (Israel was given the nuclear weapon by Fourth Republic France, with U.S. connivance.)

Since that time, U.S. policy has been to prevent others from joining the circle of nuclear powers. In practice, American policymakers have been compelled to draw an arbitrary line between those countries that already have nuclear weapons, for better or for worse (including two who forced their way in: India and Pakistan), and those who still strive for membership in the club. Iran belongs to the latter category; it wants to keep the United States from controlling its sovereign interests.

Nothing is inconceivable, of course, but many conceivable things are impossible. The world's fate may be decided by suicidal madmen. In that case, nothing can be done about it, and we must say our prayers. But serious people do not waste time making policy to deal with the impossible. They make policy for the inevitable, such as nuclear proliferation. The United States can't prevent it forever. Managing that process over the long term will require a truly international effort. ■

William Pfaff, *a longtime contributor to* Commonweal, *is the author of* The Irony of Manifest Destiny: The Tragedy of America's Foreign Policy *(Walker & Company).*

David Rieff

Reckless Ardor

YESTERDAY IRAQ, TODAY SYRIA

The great American journalist Murray Kempton once wrote that the rise of the Ayatollah Khomeini demonstrated the iron rule that, in international relations, the drunk driver had the right of way. Anyone searching for a contemporary vindication of the same rule need look no further than the enthusiasm for an American military intervention in Syria now being exhibited by the same incongruous alliance that brought us the war in Iraq and the transformation of what began (to use the more accurate nineteenth-century imperial term for it) as a punitive expedition in Afghanistan after 9/11 into a vast exercise in nation building. This alliance includes liberal interventionists such as Samantha Power, one of the key advocates within the Obama administration for U.S. involvement in the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime in Libya and currently head of the president's hubristically named Atrocities Prevention Board, and neo- and national-greatness conservatives ranging from Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham to pundits such as William Kristol and Max Boot.

At the very least, the calls for so-called humanitarian war in Syria are a textbook case of the triumph of hope over experience. The traditional understanding of war is incarnated in Clausewitz's famous axiom that it is the continuation of politics by other means. By that measure—the use of armed force to create a desired political outcome—even by the most lenient standard neither Iraq nor Afghanistan can be accounted successes. Yes, Saddam Hussein was overthrown, and Osama Bin Laden and the rest of Al Qaeda "Central" were either killed or dispersed, but in Iraq, the Baath was replaced only by a Shiite autocracy ruling over a portioned country since Kurdistan is now, in reality if not in law, an independent state. If any outside power has benefited politically it is Iran, which is generally regarded by Wash-

CNS PHOTO / KHALIL ASHAWI, REUTERS

A girl sells bread on a war-torn street in Deir al-Zor, Syria, May 9.

THE FOUR PIETÀS OF MICHELANGELO

With her left hand she says, "See
this masterpiece they've given me
then taken it away again.
They even call him Son of Man
as if I had no claim on Him.
He slips between my knees. He is
more now than I can bear."
Pity the woman who'll demand
that she have equal rights to one
who calls himself her son.

In the Deposition
the sculptor will assume
the role of Nicodemus
carrying himself the burden,
Mary and Magdalene merely
a supporting chorus.

Next, the women are left alone
to support Christ, a heavy man
in middle age, the torso one
the sculptor knows
as if it were his own.
The weight of it
with which these women struggle
is far too much for them.

But when he carves the last
reducing it until
it becomes light enough
for her alone to hold,
she is once more the sole support,
not of a horizontal weight,
a rising one, columnar, one
with her. She struggles to support
the God, the man, the son she bore
until the arm that guides the stroke
that breaks away the stone, is severed
from the sculptor's heart,
so that the work itself
is left unfinished. She remains
trying to lift the dead.

—Claire Nicolas White

Claire Nicolas White is a poet, art critic, and translator. Her poems have appeared in the New Yorker, *the* Hudson Review, *the* Paris Review, *and in six poetry books.*

ington policymakers as America's archenemy. Meanwhile, in Afghanistan preparations for U.S. withdrawal are well underway. The best possible outcome from a U.S. point of view will be for the Taliban to control most of the countryside but not take over the cities as well. That would be a situation not all that dissimilar to the one that obtained at the height of the Russian involvement in Afghanistan, when the Soviet-backed regime held the major urban centers but the Mujahideen were in charge almost everywhere else—hardly an end state that would seem to justify coalition casualties over the past decade of 3,221 dead and around 20,000 wounded.

If the conditions on the ground in Syria today, after two years of unbridled civil war, were more akin to those in Libya at the time French president Nicolas Sarkozy persuaded his NATO partners to act, or to those in Mali at the time of the recent French military intervention than they are to the conditions in Iraq or Afghanistan, then the ardor of the liberal hawks and the neoconservatives for intervention there would not seem so reckless. After all, the interventions in Libya and Mali both seemed to recapitulate the so-called humanitarian interventions of the 1990s, where the core of the debate was never whether a U.S. or NATO intervention would be successful—this, probably rightly, was taken for granted—but only whether there was really a will in Washington, Brussels, London, or Paris to intervene in a Bosnia, Rwanda, or Kosovo. But even most of those who think the United States must act in Syria concede that not only is an effective military intervention there likely to prove far more difficult than in Iraq, let alone in Mali or Kosovo; it is also by no means sure that any political result that is now imaginable will be much of an improvement over a continuation of the Assad dictatorship.

In fairness, some of the harshest critics of the Obama administration's reluctance to act argue that if it is indeed too late now, this is only because Washington did not act in 2011 before the civil war began, when Syrians were in the streets en masse peacefully demanding that, in the spirit of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, the Assad clan relinquish power. But it isn't clear what exactly these critics would have had the Obama administration do, short of going to war the moment it became clear that Assad was not going to cede power à la Mubarak or Ben Ali and his police and soldiers began killing protesters. For unlike Egypt, a client state of the United States, or Tunisia, a client state of France, Syria was beholden to Russia and Iran and as such not susceptible to American or French pressure. And unlike in Libya, Russia had blocked any UN Security Council resolution that might have permitted foreign intervention after the civil war had escalated. It is pure fantasy to imagine that Moscow would have allowed one *before* the killing and dying had begun.

In any case, all this is now moot. There is simply not going to be a Security Council authorization of the use of force against the Assad regime. Indeed, as evidence mounts

that the rebels are themselves committing a great many atrocities and, at least according to some investigators, are themselves also using military ordinance proscribed under international humanitarian law, even support for (nonbinding) anti-Assad resolutions in the UN General Assembly has begun to wane sharply. None of this, however, seems to have dampened the ardor of interventionists in the United States for decisive American military action, or lessened their outrage at what they see as the Obama administration's failure of nerve. As my friend Leon Wieseltier put it angrily in one of his recent pieces in the *New Republic*, the Obama administration was presiding "over a terrible mutilation of American discourse: the severance of conscience from action." And he demanded: "Hasn't anyone at the White House read Samantha Power's book?"

Wieseltier believes passionately in a moral imperative for what he has elsewhere called "the politics of democratization and rescue" in U.S. foreign policy. Though he differs from the neoconservatives in essential ways, in this he is not far from the analyst and military historian Max Boot, who has written of the need for "American might to promote American ideals." Of course, Wieseltier is the first to acknowledge that such interventions have been fitful rather than consistent, but he believes that those we have undertaken should be a source of pride, just as the Obama administration's refusal to take action in Syria should be a source of shame. For those, like myself, who have a far less benign view of America's intentions when it intervenes, as wells as a far less sanguine view of America's capacities to intervene intelligently and helpfully rather than counterproductively or even destructively (see Afghanistan, Iraq, etc.), such endeavors are more likely to be a poisoned chalice for both the intervener and the intervened-upon than a blow struck for the party of humanity. At the very least, the historical record is chastening. U.S. support for the Afghan Mujahideen against the Soviets empowered the Salafists—including the Hekmatyars and bin Ladens of the world—not the democrats; the U.S. overthrow of Saddam Hussein led to a government in Baghdad that is far closer to Teheran than to Washington; and U.S. support for the Syrian opposition, however well intended, is at this point far more likely to help ensure that Sunni extremists, including groups linked to Al Qaeda, hold many of the levers of power in a post-Assad Syria than to replace the current dictatorship with something at least somewhat more decent.

There are other justifications besides moral ones for a U.S. intervention to bring down Assad and the Alawites. Some believe that it would represent a severe blow to the Iranian regime as well as a defeat for Hezbollah in Lebanon, and that this is reason enough to make regime change in Syria a strategic priority for the United States. I do not find this view convincing. A far likelier outcome of Assad's fall will be the final collapse of the Taif settlement of 1990 that brought an end to fifteen years of civil war in Lebanon, and the revival of hostilities on a mass scale between Hezbollah and Sunni militias—a conflict that is already being played out with increasing ferocity on the Syrian side of the border but will be far more likely to spiral out of control in Lebanon. The possibility that this will be the knock-on effect of Assad's fall is just that—a possibility. If, however, Assad's fall comes as the result of U.S. intervention—whether this means the U.S. directly aiding the rebellion or actually doing the lion's share of the fighting—then the "Lebanonization" of a post-Assad Syria seems to me a foregone conclusion. Far from being the best hope of bringing the killing to a halt, an American intervention will almost surely make things worse, whatever its intentions, or those of the people calling for it. The only hope is in fact a negotiated settlement, brokered by the Americans and the Russians, in which neither Assad and his generals nor the rebels would get all they want or feel they deserve.

It is true that such an outcome is unlikely. For such a negotiation to take place, the Americans, as well as the Saudis and Qataris, who have been arming and financing the rebels, would have to force their clients to come to the table. And the Russians would have to do the same with the Assad regime, with Iran either joining in or at least not standing in the way. But at the moment, both the government and the rebels believe they can win, as a leaked report by the UN's negotiator, the distinguished Algerian diplomat Lakdar Brahimi, makes clear. And this is the worst possible context in which to persuade belligerents that it is time for peace talks. As a result, the likeliest outcome is that the fighting will go on until either one side prevails on the battlefield or there is a military stalemate that lasts long enough to force both sides to accept that a negotiated peace is the best they can hope for. How all this plays out will depend to a considerable degree on how much money and materiel the outside powers supporting each side decide to provide. Though it is disingenuous of interventionists in the United States to pretend that Washington is not already providing a great deal of support to the rebels, either directly or by facilitating transfers from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, it is obviously also true that direct U.S. military intervention would fundamentally transform the battle space. But whether this transformation would lead to less killing, let alone to a more humane politics, is nowhere near as self-evident as interventionists have usually claimed.

And this leads directly to the question interventionists have rarely if ever been willing to address, which is whether at this point in the Syrian Civil War it is still possible to say with confidence that taking the part of the rebels means siding with the lesser of two evils. While I presume that humanitarian interventionists would indeed reply yes to this question, I do not see how such a reply is either factually or morally sustainable. ■

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Beyond the Stalemate

Forty Years after 'Roe'

Peter Steinfels

In January we were amply reminded by marches, protests, editorials, op-ed screeds, and TV sound bites that it has been forty years since *Roe v. Wade*. Americans who were fifteen and barely beginning to register the personal and moral implications of this sweeping change in the law are now fifty-five. At least two generations have now lived out their choices about sex and parenthood entirely under the post-*Roe* regime. And yet the matter remains unsettled. Are the appalling practices revealed at the trial of Dr. Kermit B. Gosnell in Philadelphia the work of a rogue abortion provider—or a window into the dehumanizing logic governing all abortion? Are newly passed laws in Arkansas and North Dakota that prohibit abortion after a fetal heartbeat can be detected only the oddities of outlier states—or cracks in the public perception of *Roe*'s rationale? It would be insufficient to say that Americans are deeply divided among themselves over abortion. Rather, they are deeply divided *within* themselves.

Poll data about abortion are notoriously slippery; much depends on the wording of the questions, the margin of error, the choice of comparisons over time. The latest findings show a strong majority of Americans, between 60 and 70 percent, opposed to overturning *Roe*, while hefty pluralities consider abortion morally wrong (47 percent) and would significantly restrict legal access (35 percent). Nonetheless, the most notable finding remains how little public opinion has changed. Those hailing this or that change of a few percentage points as a definitive prolife or prochoice "trend" are very likely to be disappointed.

For American Catholics, the abortion issue has been even more stubbornly divisive. Clear majorities judge abortion to be morally wrong *and* simultaneously reject overturning *Roe*. Abortion has created new rifts in the church—and widened and politicized some that had been opening since Vatican II and *Humanae vitae*.

Division is not necessarily a bad thing; witness the current commemoration of the once profoundly divisive Emancipation Proclamation and abolition of slavery. That Americans and American Catholics remain divided over abortion is, in important ways, to our credit. But some divisions are more necessary, compelling, or expedient than others. Some are well considered and executed, others are not. Some are paralyzing and self-destructive, others point toward fruitful resolution. Forty years after *Roe*, it is incumbent on Catholics to reexamine their stance toward abortion and its legalization.

There is natural resistance to any such reexamination. This is a topic associated with too much pain—and often hidden pain—along with too much hypocrisy, illusion, and male betrayal. Many Catholics who are angry at church leaders or prolife activists for their harsh rhetoric, political absolutism, moral righteousness, or general attitudes toward women and sexuality simply refuse to think about the topic further. Prolife leaders, on the other hand, boost morale by seizing on any uptick in public opinion, any success in a state legislature, and every fresh summons from religious authorities as confirmation that their present course, no matter how inadequate or counterproductive, is unassailable. Some of them found fresh evidence in a January 14 *Time* cover story announcing that although abortion-rights activists won a great victory with *Roe*, "they've been losing ever since." Emphasizing recent legal roadblocks to obtaining abortions in conservative (and mostly less populated) states, the article was essentially a conventional call to arms for a younger, fresher, more communications-savvy prochoice movement. If this was proof of right-to-life success, so are the alarmist fundraising letters regularly sent out by Planned Parenthood. Planned Parenthood has recently even abandoned the term "prochoice" in favor of a "no labels" public-relations effort when it comes to abortion rights.

My own reexamination of the Catholic stance on abortion begins with two simple statements and then attempts to determine what conclusions and practical proposals might flow from them.

First statement: From the very earliest stages of its life, the unborn offspring of human beings constitutes an individual member of the human species deserving the same protections from harm and destruction owed to born humans.

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Bay City, Michigan, June 1973

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Second statement: This conviction, taught by the Catholic Church and shared by many people, religious and nonreligious, is nowhere near as obvious as many of us who hold it suppose.

Let me say just a word about how the first of those two convictions relates to my religious faith.

Fertilization, a remarkable process involving the union of twenty-three chromosomes from each parent, creates a new, unique, individual member of the human species, a physically dependent but genetically distinct and self-directing organism. That is a scientific fact, not one dependent on faith or religious teaching. However, to say that such an individual human life, from the completion of fertilization or at any later stage, including adolescence, deserves the full protection afforded individual humans generally is a moral claim, one informed by science but not dictated by it.

That moral claim is made by the moral tradition and community to which I belong, the Catholic Church. Since my Catholicism has been a matter of lifelong commitment, critical reflection, spiritual experience, and regular practice, its teaching is obviously important to me. By no means, however, is that the single basis on which I affirm that claim about unborn life. Like any other historically aware Catholic, I know that there are issues about which my moral tradition and community, in a history of many centuries, right up to the last, have been seriously, even shockingly, in error. Furthermore, growing up Catholic I did not hear priests rail against abortion. To the contrary, given the reticence, perhaps I should say prudery, of that environment, the subject was seldom mentioned. On the rare occasions when it was mentioned, abortion was certainly assumed to be a grave wrong. So were many other things mentioned far more often. One of them, for example, was contraception, about which I later concluded that the hierarchy's continuing condemnation was a tragic and self-destructive error.

In regard to abortion, what my Catholicism perhaps gave me more than anything else was the felt obligation to think philosophically—that is, to reason about moral choices in light of underlying principles that could be examined for validity and applied consistently. So it was largely to philosophical reasoning that I turned in the years before and after *Roe,* when the moral and legal status of abortion began to be extensively debated in the United States—and when people my age, including friends and family members, began to confront the question in personal terms. As a Catholic I approached this body of reasoning with the predisposition that, objectively speaking, abortion was a grave evil for both mother and unborn child. Vatican II, a council I warmly welcomed, was notable for not focusing on condemnations. But abortion was condemned in no uncertain terms, along with genocide, slavery, euthanasia, terrorism, and indiscriminate bombing of civilian populations.

On the other hand, the conclusion that the church's position on abortion, however well-meaning, is seriously flawed (as I had concluded its position on contraception is) could not be dismissed out of hand; and, in fact, that possibility might have removed many tensions from my personal relationships, political affiliations, and professional undertakings.

I need not rehearse here my exploration of those philosophical arguments. From time to time I attempt it anew to see if anything has changed. I can only say that, despite whatever convenience the prochoice arguments might have afforded me, I have found them unpersuasive. A number of those most ballyhooed at that earlier time involved analogies like being abducted and connected for nine months to a world-famous violinist with your circulatory system

maintaining his failing kidneys. These raised fewer questions in my mind about abortion than about contemporary styles in philosophical reasoning. I have learned from the insights of ethicists like Margaret Little and those recounted by Bernard G. Prusak in his excellent *Commonweal* article last November on Catholic discourse about abortion ("A Riskier Discourse," November 23). I have read the book *Embryo: A Defense of Human Life*, by Robert P. George and Christopher Tollefsen, with a great deal of agreement, and the book *The Church and Abortion: A Catholic Dissent*, by my admired friend George Dennis O'Brien, with a great deal of disappointment.

But if this periodic exploration, along with much personal discussion and reflection, did not alter my fundamental conviction about unborn lives and our moral obligation to preserve them, it did do something else. It led to my second point: The conviction that the unborn human being, from the earliest stages of life, deserves the full protections afforded born individuals is nowhere near as obvious as many who hold it, including myself, generally suppose.

In the years preceding *Roe*, campaigns to loosen legal restrictions on abortion at the state level had simmered and occasionally flared. But that decision, as we all know, did not only modify but swept aside laws in fifty states. It sent shock waves through a large portion of the population, Catholics in particular, who held abortion to be an unjustified taking of a human life. A genuine grassroots antiabortion movement arose, which church leaders, already active in those state-level battles, quickly reinforced but never controlled. Stunned by Justice Blackmun's dismissal of any need to "resolve the difficult question of when life begins," the antiabortion movement focused on that as the crux of the matter. When a few prominent ethicists followed their defenses of abortion to the conclusion that indeed infanticide, too, might well fall into the realm of the permissible, the antiabortion movement found further grounds for insisting on the "moment of conception" as the single factual firewall against a thoroughgoing collapse of the right to life.

Lost in this reaction was any sense that this position—which I myself hold, though with reservations about the literal understanding of "moment"—was far less clear, far more ambiguous than its proponents recognized. There are of course the many philosophical arguments pointing to one or another transition in early human development as the critical point for recognizing that the unborn individual, or even the born individual, possesses the characteristics making him or her deserving of the protections from lethal harm owed humans generally: implantation, embryonic development beyond the possibility of twinning, the emergence of heartbeat, primitive nervous system, brain waves, quickening, viability, developed nervous system and brain, sentience and vulnerability to pain, passage through the birth canal, consciousness, social recognition or maternal bonding, and so on.

Biologically and philosophically, each of these markers, examined one by one, makes less sense to me than the position I hold—and of course each conflicts as well with all the others. Taken cumulatively, however, they signal the many doubts that confront convictions like mine regarding the value and rights of embryonic and fetal lives. But intricate philosophical arguments, many of them articulated by academics in the wake of *Roe* to defend legal abortion, are probably less to the point here than more intuitive perceptions. To mention them may raise the hackles of the philosophically minded. I am not, however, addressing the argument that the moral status of the unborn is equivalent "from conception" to that of the infant or child. I am merely trying to make understandable why that argument lacks the force that many of us expect it to possess.

Consider one looming case: the position on abortion of Orthodox Judaism. This of course is subject to some limited debate within the Orthodox community; all the more reason for me not to pretend to expertise. Still, its general stance seems relevant, given that rabbinical Judaism is, if not the parent, then the elder sibling of Christianity. The Orthodox community is God-fearing. It resists modifying its understanding of divine commands to accommodate the larger society or culture. It values the life of the unborn. It is generally opposed to abortion. It is in fact much more pro-natal than Christianity.

And yet in the case of a potentially lethal conflict between mother and fetus Orthodox Judaism does not recognize the unborn individual as owed the same protection from killing as born humans, at least not until a substantial part of the newborn or the newborn's head has emerged from the mother's body. This position builds on a long tradition of reasoning and debate that took into consideration what was known or assumed at the time not only about fetal development but also about the needs and condition of the mother. In case of a conflict between the life of the unborn and the life of the mother, killing the unborn is not merely permissible, it may be mandatory.

Now I may think that aspects of this teaching suffer from premodern understandings or even fundamentalism, but I cannot deny—and I wish a church that is belatedly sensitive to its closeness with Judaism would recognize—that this position is held by a devout, thoughtful, morally precise, and culturally unaccommodating community.

Let me offer another, less imposing illustration. Glen Tinder is a political philosopher whose books reflect a strong Augustinian cast of mind. He states, for example, that his book *Liberty: Rethinking an Imperiled Ideal* is written "from a Christian point of view." Christianity, he argues "contains truths—for example, about human nature—that everyone, regardless of religious or irreligious orientation, should seriously consider."

About abortion, however, Tinder is torn. "It can be argued that fetuses are persons" and "abortion in most circumstances is akin to murder," he writes, and "yet to feel that it ought

to be allowed, at least within limits." He elaborates: "To compel a woman to have a severely malformed child or to die in childbirth is compelling an act of heroism that should surely be left to personal choice." Even in the case of normal pregnancies, Tinder shies away from a legal ban. "Perhaps abortions in many circumstances should be allowed simply in order that not having an abortion can remain a moral act."

This is not an extended argument. If it were, Tinder would have to confront a lot of objections, certainly from me. Still, even as simply an observation, a perception, it comes from a classically conservative Christian thinker not at all hesitant to avow and apply his faith or to challenge the cultural status quo. Instances of similar thinkers and similar conclusions could be multiplied many times over.

Workers compile a prolife delegate list for the Democratic National Convention in 1980.

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I am not backtracking on my original position about fetal life. I continue to think that compared to the alternatives it is more in keeping with biological facts, with sound moral principles, and with what we want morality and law to do by way of protecting human life and well-being. But that position does have to take account of the ambiguity surrounding the question. Many, probably most, abortion opponents assume that this ambiguity exists only in the minds of their prochoice adversaries. *I am arguing that it also exists in the very situation itself.* There is a universal and yet sui generis aspect of pregnancy: one dependent but distinct human being develops within the very body of another. This fact strains the analogies to which we resort in trying to analyze when or why protection is or is not extended to human lives.

Consider also the simple matter of size. In its earliest stages of cell division, growth, and movement, the embryo, having begun as "a tiny speck," remains no larger than the period you find at the end of this sentence. Even four weeks after conception, when, I like to point out to prochoice interlocutors, the embryo has begun to have a heartbeat, it is no more than the length of this parenthesis (——). It is counterintuitive, it challenges much of our everyday sense, to insist that anything so small can be the bearer of rights that would outweigh the drastic impact that its continued existence might have on the life of its mother or her family.

Again, it is another common intuition that abortion at a later stage of development is not only, like a later miscarriage, more traumatic physically and psychologically, but graver morally. That intuition, too, challenges my position and the church's that a fetus possesses the same right to protection regardless of its state of development.

These are, as I said, intuitions. Of course we have come to accept many aspects of reality that once were or even remain challenges to our intuitions and what passes for common sense. That includes the fact that the pages you are reading, like our bodies and everything around us, are constituted by force fields of whirling infinitesimal particles of energy and matter rather than the solids we perceive—or the even more dazzling and bewildering notions that are grist for the weekly Science section in the *New York Times*. Antimatter, anyone? Dark energy? Higgs boson? On behalf of the counterintuitively tiny, one is tempted to drag in the refrain of Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hears a Who*: "A person's a person no matter how small." Still, the tiny endangered creatures Horton, the prolife elephant, saves are miniscule versions, or at least Dr. Seuss versions, of ourselves, not pencil points of dynamically developing cells. In the case of embryonic life, sheer size plus sheer invisibility plus incipient development explain why all the analogies to obviously human victims of the Holocaust or of slavery fall short—and even appear deeply offensive.

If we affirm the church's teaching but also recognize the counterintuitive and problematic elements inherent in it—inherent in it, and not just springing from the ignorance or dogmatism or self-interest or hard-heartedness of its opponents—where do these two points leave us? First, the stakes remain high. This is a high-stakes issue for the destinies of women and families—pregnant teenagers, women with unintended pregnancies that threaten health, family welfare, and on rare occasions life itself. The stakes are as high as stakes can be for the unborn at risk for destruction. They are high for those of us who cannot evade the conviction that abortion involves the direct killing of an individual member of our human community. But second,

we must admit that this latter perception is surrounded by a degree of ambiguity and by conflicting moral traditions and intuitions that makes any clear-cut consensus about it highly unlikely for the foreseeable future. That fact is what poses seemingly intractable problems for law and policy.

Our constitutional democracy, which I support as the system most likely to protect life and foster human flourishing, seems at an impasse. As already noted, most Americans are opposed to any across-the-board recriminalization of abortion. Most of them would tolerate, probably even welcome, some restrictions on access to abortion, whether by geography or stated reasons or method or degree of fetal development. A reconfiguration of the Supreme Court or a far greater grassroots anti-abortion movement than now seems at all in the offing could presumably produce some such restrictions. But overturning *Roe* and returning the question to the states will at most do the same. Faced with proposals that would ban virtually all abortions, or establish the legal personhood of embryos, voters in even the nation's most anti-abortion states have balked. And the sharp division over abortion within the nation's leading political and culture-shaping elites, to say nothing of the actions of desperate women seeking abortions, would render any substantial restrictions, to say nothing of nearly total prohibition, highly vulnerable to protest, mobilization, reaction, and backlash. Recall that no sooner had Mitt Romney, the prolife candidate in 2012, been nominated than his sister, despite her belief that "life is sacred," dismissed the possibility that he would be "touching any of that." Abortion should be safe and legal, she said. "Every woman needs to be left to make her own choice." A Romney administration would recognize that the ban endorsed in the GOP platform "is never going to happen," she said. "Women would take to the streets. Women fought for our choice, we're not going to go back."

The church and its prolife allies are at an impasse as well. In my estimation, they have had one enormous success. I will return to that. But they also owe themselves and their cause a hard look at some of their missteps.

First, the imbalance between legal action and cultural persuasion. This imbalance was understandable. The anti-abortion movement was galvanized into existence by a sudden and sweeping change in the law. Naturally it set out to change the law back. But for many Catholics in the early 1970s, this strategy was all too reminiscent of the church's unsuccessful rear-guard actions opposing the legal sale of contraceptives. Moreover, it came at a time when *Humanae vitae* had dismayed many Catholics and diminished the bishops' chances of rallying them behind anything at all to do with matters sexual. With all the twenty-twenty vision afforded by hindsight, I would say the movement made a serious strategic error in throwing its organizational energy into legal, not cultural, mobilization. Yes, we know that law, too, is culture-forming and culture-constitutive. Yet in this case, the law's potential to form a culture protective of early life appears undermined by the burdens of enforcement and punishment that statutes inevitably trigger.

Second, the tendency to concentrate on scientific findings about embryonic life as though these rendered unnecessary the examination and defense of moral premises. Prolife activists often assumed that if they could demonstrate the biological character of the fetus—as biologically unique, for example, constitutionally programmed to develop, and genetically distinct from both parents—then its moral claim to protection was ipso facto settled. This prolife turn to science was a natural response to blatantly unscientific prochoice sloganeering, like that declaring the fetus a part of the mother's body. Right-to-lifers could only feel the same way as evolutionists feel about creationists—except that in this case, the phenomenon could not be explained by lack of education. It could be explained only by moral blindness or outright deviousness, and that justifiable reaction nevertheless made it all the more difficult for prolifers to engage seriously with more plausible justifications of abortion.

Third, the tendency to use rhetoric and images that do similar injustice to biological facts. By dwelling on images of late-term fetuses and terms like babies, infants, and children, prolife activists have unwittingly exaggerated the degree of fetal development at the stages when the vast number of abortions occur. This too has made it difficult to grasp imaginatively the moral and mental framework of those who are prochoice.

Fourth, acquiescing in Operation Rescue's becoming the movement's public face in the 1980s, along with other aggressively evangelical and sometimes antifeminist militants. This was a major turning point. Operation Rescue was to prolife what the Black Panthers were to civil rights. No major social struggle is without zealotry. Prolonged conflict produces radicals, and radicals challenge existing leadership. The Catholic Church had infused the right-to-life movement with a tradition of philosophical, universalist, and civic reasoning. Perhaps out of frustration, growing militancy, and solidarity with purported allies, Catholic prolifers failed to distance themselves from a very different style—confrontational, fundamentalist, authoritarian, and even misogynist. As a result, news media had their prochoice biases confirmed. Here, in dramatic images of angy people blocking clinics and shouting at women, the movement was revealing its true self. Polls soon showed that opposition to abortion was far outdistanced by opposition to abortion's opponents. Years later, it was mind-boggling that Operation Rescue's founder, Randall Terry, who has done incalculable harm to the prolife cause, should emerge as a key player in the opposition to President Obama's 2009 commencement appearance at Notre Dame. And nothing did more harm to the prolife cause in the 2012 election cycles than notions and language about abortion and rape that have long floated around anti-abortion circles but when voiced by conservative GOP candidates rightly appalled the public.

Fifth, the thoroughgoing integration of the prolife cause

into the culture-wars agenda and the hard-nosed politics of the Religious Right and its conservative allies in the Republican Party. To a great extent this unhappy development was simply an equal and opposite reaction to the dogmatism and partisanship of prochoice forces. But was it necessary for the National Right to Life Committee to make Karl Rove its July 4 keynote speaker in the midst of the 2008 presidential election? Was it necessary to target and decimate prolife Democrats in 2010 for not toeing the right-to-life (and the bishops') line on Obama's health-care reform? Those bishops who hewed to Cardinal Joseph Bernardin's "consistent ethic of life" as a bulwark against embroiling the church in this political and cultural polarization have been sharply reduced in numbers and influence. Their place has been taken by bishops who increasingly reinterpret church teaching about prudential judgments in politics and ignore their own distinction between advocacy for the unborn and directly taking sides in electoral contests.

Sixth, and possibly most important, hostility to the women's movement. It is true that 1960s feminism marched under a banner of abortion on demand. It is true, although too much can be made of this, that in the post-*Roe* period prochoice and prolife allegiances frequently reflected attitudes toward traditional gender roles. Those facts blinded many prolifers to a larger reality: The movement for women's equality, with its rejection of traditional gender discrimination and demand for opportunities to exercise a full range of talents in public roles, is not an epiphenomenon of the '60s or of a decadent West. It is a global world-historical development, a change destined to affect everything from political institutions and family structures to religious systems and moral perceptions. At the moment, defenders of abortion have nearly given up any moral argument about the moral status of the unborn. They simply collapse that question into the larger one of this incontestable demand for women's equality and dignity and the whole panoply of related issues, from birth control and health services to anti-rape protection and economic security.

The prolife movement sincerely and I think correctly believes that promoting the rights of women and the rights of their offspring, born and unborn, are ultimately the same task. But the lack of highly visible solidarity with women's struggles for equality has not made this belief very persuasive. The Catholic Church, with its closed all-male clerical leadership, is also not well positioned in either image or substance to deal with this world-historical development. How can its anti-abortion teaching not be seen as linked to male bias? It will take deliberately dramatic and creative actions to change that impression. Currently, church leaders seem to be reinforcing it.

We should not ignore the obstacles, some self-imposed, that now hamper anti-abortion advocacy. Despite all these stumbling blocks, however, the same moral forces have achieved something remarkable. Four decades after *Roe*, abortion remains a serious moral issue despite a concerted effort to have it accepted as a routine medical procedure. That might sound like a purely negative achievement. But consider. Millions upon millions of women, many encouraged or supported or pressured by men, have undergone abortions over those decades. They have a deep psychological investment, whether troubled or not, in their actions. To view abortion as routine therapy obviously minimizes internal conflict. Meanwhile, the effort to render abortion a routine procedure, perhaps unhappy or even tragic like many other medical procedures but morally neutral nonetheless, has been unrelenting. The forces behind this effort are morally committed, ideologically single-minded, well organized, well funded, and well placed in the nation's cultural and socio-economic elites. In their view, abortion is almost always unpleasant, often psychologically painful, and not infrequently accompanied by a bitter sense of personal failure or male abandonment; but nothing that could be considered morally burdensome or possibly stigmatizing should stand in the way of those contemplating abortion. If against these odds abortion remains something apart from other medical procedures, something morally charged, something demanding a totally different level of self-scrutiny or conscientious struggle, Catholic teaching and the Catholic bishops deserve a great deal of the credit.

Legal battles have played a part in keeping abortion apart from other "reproductive" issues. But legal opposition can only go so far. It needs to be served with equal doses of argument and witness.

I believe that this remains the front line in our society's struggle over abortion. Will abortion be "mainstreamed" as just another medical procedure, however regrettable, or will it remain morally fraught? I do not deny that the legal battles have played a part in keeping abortion apart from other "reproductive" issues. I think that the battle over federal funding of abortion has been essentially about this very important distinction, far more than about actually facilitating or limiting abortions—and the bishops essentially won this all-important symbolic point before deciding to oppose the Affordable Care Act. But legal opposition can only go so far, in fact it can easily go too far. By itself, it can make abortion stand apart not as morally fraught but only as politically fraught. Legal opposition needs to be served with equal doses of argument and witness.

As far into the future as I can see, the residual uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding the beginnings and early stages of human development mean that the gap will not disappear between, on the one hand, what a community like the Catholic people teaches as morally demanded, and therefore what individual Catholics should urge with family and friends regarding their own actions, and, on the other hand, what can be legally established in a diverse, pluralist society. So when it comes to the law, Catholics or anyone concerned about the rights and protection due early fetal lives may need to focus less on the one most logical marker (conception) and argue instead for a consensus around a converging or cumulating set of markers. They should continue to insist that unborn lives deserve protection from their beginnings. Perhaps someday a combination of philosophical argument, moral credibility gained on other issues, and communal behavior that proclaims the sanctity of human life at every stage will convince the majority of Americans of that position. Meanwhile, Catholics and other opposed to abortion should strive for the legal protection of unborn life not from conception but from that point where not one but a whole constellation of converging arguments and intuitions can be brought to bear.

Where might that point be? Many years ago, I proposed eight weeks of development—when the embryo is now recognized as a fetus, all organs are present that will later be developed fully, the heart has been pumping for a month, electrical activity in its brain is discernible, it has a distinctly human appearance, responds to stimulation of its nose or mouth, and is over an inch in size. This is not a "magic moment" when "human life begins." This is simply a moment—and others may nominate a different one—when an accumulation of evidence should compel a majority even in a pluralist society, and despite whatever obscurities about early life remain to be debated, to agree that the unborn individual deserves legal protection. Beyond that, only extreme circumstances should allow exceptions.

Of course, the church should not stop there. It can and in my opinion should continue to oppose government funding of elective abortion precisely to resist that "mainstreaming" of it as a standard medical procedure. But otherwise to narrow the gap between what it believes is morally right and what the society will legally require, the church will have to focus its energies primarily on changing the culture rather than the law. Here Catholicism has some major resources, prime among them a heritage of philosophical reasoning that has continued to frame many of the issues in medical ethics. It was precisely the potential of this tradition for making an impact among culture-forming elites that was set back when Catholic philosophical leadership was overtaken by Operation Rescue and similar sectarian groups.

Obviously the church should insist on its more stringent moral, even if not necessarily legal, position within its own ranks. It should maintain a bright-line opposition to anything that would make its own institutions directly participate in providing abortions. It should be open to thoughtful questioning of its moral teaching, whether from Catholics or non-Catholics, but it should not hesitate to charitably correct anyone who misrepresents that teaching, whether deliberately or from ignorance. That certainly includes public Catholics, although church leaders should distinguish clearly here between differences on moral fundamentals and differences on prudential political judgments or legal positions.

But the church should not stop there either. Yes, it must be a community of teaching and argument. But it must also be a community of witness. Again, it already has another great resource: its often little-noted initiatives and its still greater potential to provide care and support for women with troubled pregnancies, to provide adoptive families, and to work on behalf of families and children in difficult circumstances. When it comes to recognizing the humanity of the unborn, alongside the humanity of their mothers, actions, as always, speak louder than words.

And again the church should not stop there. So much more could be said about the church as witness. How can we really be a "church of life"? Why are we so widely seen as anything but a church of *life*? A church of *energy* and *vitality*? Of *growth*? Of *risk*? Of *wonder* and *joy* and *surprise*? That question is not for this essay.

Let me only add this, because it pertains to the question of abortion and the culture. I do not challenge the idea that abortion is "foundational" in a hierarchy of moral issues. But in the order of witness what is foundational may be something much smaller, much clearer, much more tangible, much less obscured with controversy. That the universe, against a great many appearances, is created and sustained by Love is certainly foundational. But witnessing to that cosmic and ultimate reality is less likely to begin with metaphysical argument than with a compassionate word, a shared crust of bread, a warm embrace.

To summarize: The church should acknowledge the inherently difficult boundary-line obstacles to perceiving the moral status of unborn human life in its earliest stages. The church should work for the legal protection of unborn lives from a point where there is much greater likelihood of achieving a moral consensus, even as it continues to argue, especially among its own members, for the moral obligation of protecting unborn lives from the earliest stages of development. The church should make this argument credible by how it responds to the needs of women and the challenge of life-disrupting pregnancies. The church should also make all its beliefs credible by its compassionate concern for the poor, the weak, the alien, and the outcast, and by its celebration of ancient truths and openness to new wisdom. The church will not effectively testify to the ultimate or the foundational unless it begins with the immediate and the tangible. Not as a logical exercise in ethical analysis but as an expression of practical witness, this garment really is seamless. ■

Richard Alleva

Roaring Mad

'THE GREAT GATSBY'

When I heard that Baz Luhrmann was filming *The Great Gatsby*, I gagged. Sure, the Australian director's feature debut, *Strictly Ballroom*, was a delightful piece of camp, but this was followed by a *Romeo + Juliet* that killed the star-crossed lovers with cinematic tricks long before poison and poniard did them in. Then there was *Moulin Rouge!*, a migraine-inducing musical that looked like a two-hour commercial in search of a product, and *Australia*, a catalog of cowboy clichés aspiring to be a national epic. *Poor Gatsby!* He'd already been assassinated three times on the big screen. Couldn't his corpse be left floating in that swimming pool once and for all?

But these things aren't predictable. Luhrmann's *Gatsby* turns out to be a triumph of both faithfulness and daring. It conveys some of the novel's glories and possesses virtues all its own. I realized all would be well about five minutes into the movie when we first meet the narrator, Nick Carraway (Tobey Maguire), as he hurries to his job selling bonds on Wall Street. Starting from the height of a Manhattan skyscraper, the camera hurtles straight down toward Nick's upturned face as he smiles at us blissfully from the midst of the rush-hour mob. The sensation of being alive, alert, and happily plugged into capitalism's creative and destructive energies has never been so neatly captured. Here is a young man about to receive a sentimental education in an era and place redefining all sorts of sentiments.

And of course that education comes from being an observer and abettor of the destiny of Jay Gatsby (Leonardo DiCaprio), a nabob from nowhere comfortably ensconced in a Long Island mansion near Nick's shabby rented villa. Drawn into Gatsby's glamorous orbit, Nick quickly becomes a willing pawn in his enigmatic neighbor's attempt to win back the love of his life, Daisy (Carey Mulligan), who happens to be Nick's cousin and is married to a polo-playing brute named Tom Buchanan.

As staged by Luhrmann, Gatsby's parties verge on being Roman orgies. Fitzgerald once considered calling his book *Trimalchio in West Egg* because, like that other social upstart in Petronius's *The Satyricon*, Gatsby uses his parties to advertize his bounty. The novelist could afford to describe these blowouts economically since his readers were already familiar with such affairs through experience or hearsay. But Luhrmann knows that, removed as we are by nearly a century from that era, the Roaring Twenties must be made to roar again. So he lays on the garish extravagance with gusto—Harlem dancers, grand pianos, empty whiskey bottles in the swimming pool, waiters doubling as bouncers, Charlestons, fox trots, the works. The use of hip-hop on the soundtrack has been criticized, but what the critics don't seem to get is that while we moviegoers are hearing rap, the characters are hearing jazz. The aural disjunction is Luhrmann's attempt—successful in my view—to communicate the shock '20s jazz delivered to genteel sensibilities.

However wild, Gatsby's parties are all part of his careful design. Everything he displays to the public constitutes an implicit promise to Daisy that he is a modern American magnifico with the power to protect and cherish her. She isn't merely a woman he desires but the

WARNER BROS. PICTURES

finishing touch of his self-invention. Gatsby's obsession has to it more than a hint of madness, whose tremors are felt in his parties before he even appears on screen.

When Leonardo DiCaprio finally does show up (an entrance charmingly heralded by Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*), it's clear that the actor understands Gatsby's doubleness: on the one hand, the sartorial elegance, the self-delighting generosity, the country-squire jocularity (he addresses male acquaintances as "old sport"); on the other hand, the insecurity of a man not just self-made in the financial sense but radically self-contrived. This Gatsby has the slight twitchiness that such insecurity can cause, and panic appears whenever his carefully guarded persona is challenged. Neither Luhrmann nor DiCaprio shrink from the fact that Gatsby is, after all, a bootlegger, even a gangster, though an unusually sensitive one. Long before the bloody climax, we see signs of violence just beneath the film's glossy surface. Robert Redford lacked pathos in the 1974 film because he came across with the unruffled cool of a successful CEO, but DiCaprio knows that Gatsby hasn't had quite enough time to settle into his role. He's conspicuously well dressed, but also aware of being a bit of a runt, and he enunciates "old sport" with a hick's idea of a WASP accent. This Jay Gatsby is a work in progress, never to be finished, and his callowness heightens the tragedy.

The script, written by Luhrmann and Craig Pearce, makes two important changes to the original story, one of which works. Midway through the novel, Gatsby reveals to Nick some of the truth about his impoverished childhood, but the reader doesn't find out why Daisy left Gatsby for Buchanan until the last thirty pages, and so the hero remains a glittering enigma through most of the book. By revealing more of the millionaire's background much earlier than Fitzgerald does, Luhrmann and Pearce sacrifice some of the character's mystery for greater empathy: knowing all along about Gatsby's humble origins, we suffer with him as he mingles with the swells and pursues his heart's desire.

But I disliked the script's addition of a framing device: Nick writing the story at his psychiatrist's behest as he recovers from a nervous breakdown. Both in the novel and in the film, Carraway seems too normal, too grounded, to let Gatsby's tragedy undo him this drastically, and Toby Maguire's usual nice-guy solidity, appropriate for the main narrative, jars with the gimmickry of making the story a therapeutic memoir.

If possible, see the 3-D version. As usual, the 3-D production process has the effect of detaching the foreground from the background, so that the actors look as if they were performing in front of dioramas, but in this case, that effect becomes something of a virtue. For Gatsby is living in a kind of fantasy world of his own design. He's never really at one with his surroundings, and 3-D emphasizes this.

Luhrmann's penchant for fast cuts, which rendered *Moulin Rouge!* airless, here supports the characterizations. When Gatsby speeds into Manhattan while telling Nick tall tales about his past, the rapid shots of his yellow Duisenberg roaring around corners and in and out of traffic become a commentary on the millionaire's blarney but also a reflection of his energy and swashbuckling charm. (These shots also foreshadow the part this car will play in the catastrophe to come.) Nick's reunion with Daisy takes place in a drawing room where breezes billow white curtains. Shots of Daisy on a divan mingle with shots of waving draperies, making her look almost cloud-borne. Is she ethereal or just emotionally flimsy, or both?

Daisy is a nearly impossible role to fill because she must be the girl of our dreams as well as Gatsby's. I loved Carey Mulligan in *An Education* and *Shame*, but her specialty is vulnerability mitigated by common sense and pluck. Here she is intelligent and sometimes moving, but she never communicates the essence of Daisy: the princess entitled to sleep on silk sheets and unable to imagine how anyone could settle for mere linen.

The strapping Joel Edgerton, a kind of Australian Burt Lancaster, has no trouble conveying Tom Buchanan's heartiness, but he also shows us this well-heeled ignoramus's love for Daisy. Elizabeth Debicki, towering over nearly every man in the cast, is Jordan Baker to the life, and it's not her fault that Fitzgerald gave her so little to do in the second half of the story. As the pathetic Wilsons, unconscious instruments of Gatsby's doom, Isla Fisher hits only the most obvious notes but Jason Clarke nicely communicates the pathos within a poor slob's devotion to his blowsy wife.

Jay Gatsby is an American archetype, and archetypes never go away. The same day I saw the movie, I caught an episode of *Mad Men*, and there was Don Draper, born Dick Whitman but reborn from the ashes of the dead man whose name he stole, suave, splendidly accoutered, a prince of his profession, envied by males, desired by women, self-made and self-hating. Gatsby lives! ■

Nathan Pippenger

A Long Way from Athens

On Politics
A History of Political Thought: From Herodotus to the Present
Alan Ryan
Liveright, $75, 1,152 pp.

Who would undertake to write a history of all political thought, and why? Many a writer will assay a history of this or that political thinker (who was Hobbes?), or of how a thinker treated this or that major concept (what did Hobbes think about sovereignty?). But it takes rare ambition to attempt total histories. From a writer's point of view—and perhaps a reader's—*Three Views of Sovereignty in Early Modern England* is considerably less daunting than *Sovereignty: A History from Ancient Greece to the United Nations*.

There are sound reasons for political theorists to maintain a narrower focus. The history and institutions of a given society tend to restrict the range of questions and methods political theory can apply to it. Many scholars, moreover, see little value in "total histories" of concepts, or indeed in any study that goes too far beyond individual thinkers and specific questions. How, after all, can we speak of a concept of "sovereignty" persisting from ancient Athens to now? In 2013 we conceive of sovereignty in ways that would have puzzled our great-grandparents, let alone thinkers who lived centuries before the rise of nation-states. The risk of anachronism runs high. The history of thought is beset with concerns about the proper ascription of influence, the difficulty of tracing intellectual connections across thinkers and eras, and the worthiness of the traditional list of canonical texts.

With all these cautions in mind, we turn to Alan Ryan's new book, *On Politics: A History of Political Thought: From Herodotus to the Present*. Ryan, a political theorist and author of books on John Dewey and John Stuart Mill, has enjoyed a distinguished career at Oxford and Princeton, and in the pages of the *New York Review of Books*, for over forty years. He is an elegant writer and an engaging guide to the great dead philosophers whose thoughts fill these two volumes (totaling over a thousand pages and handsomely paired in a boxed set). And in his own, subtle way, he is a bold participant in an ongoing debate over what political thought can or ought to be. *On Politics* is aimed at educated nonspecialist readers with an interest in politics, philosophy, or social theory—people who know a thing or two about Marx and Socrates, but perhaps not William of Ockham or Marsilius of Padua. Such readers will find here an authoritative guide to more than two millennia of Western political thought, as well as a confident, even stylish, entry into important debates within hermeneutics and the philosophy of history. *On Politics* is a history that doubles as an argument about what such histories can be, and what we are doing when we read them.

If Ryan is not overly didactic about these debates, neither is he shy about them. At the beginning of the first volume, he declares his belief that "the project of entering into the thoughts of the long dead and rethinking them for our own purposes is both possible and useful." As he well knows, some of his colleagues view this notion as not only naïve, but pernicious. Such "rethinking," in this skeptical view, encourages anachronism by allowing readers to project their concepts and their biases onto the unwilling dead, leading us to mistake our thoughts for theirs. (What would Locke think of Social Security? How would Grotius feel about the "war on terror?") Yet, as Ryan skillfully demonstrates, we can in fact engage past writers for present benefit once we abandon the expectation that dead philosophers can "answer" our questions and the assumption that they set out to do so. There is a winning, provocative self-assurance about Ryan's confidence that this process, if we go about it carefully, can indeed help us think through our own problems.

History, then, is the book's main purpose, but not its *sole* purpose. Political

theory, Ryan writes, is an instrumental discipline, "a mixture of philosophical analysis, moral judgment, constitutional speculation, and practical advice." Studying the history of this discipline helps build the foundation for a critical examination of politics, which in turn is often a form—and always a precondition—of political action. Like all great teachers, Ryan is not content merely to fill his students' heads with knowledge and send them away. He is inviting his readers into a discussion that, while more than a few steps removed from the world of policy and current events, may nonetheless prove politically productive.

But what is it producing? Certainly one doesn't come away from *On Politics*—or any work of political theory, for that matter—in sudden possession of political wisdom, or a specific plan for addressing this or that political problem. What readers *will* gain is a deeper knowledge of what their forebears thought, and of how these ideas both reflected their eras and endured beyond them. Ryan writes not merely as a historian, but also as a theorist, making judgments on the coherence or plausibility of different arguments. Thinking through the ideas of past philosophers not only clarifies our own beliefs, but helps us recognize the fundamentally contingent and largely artificial nature of political life. Ideas do not simply emerge because they are good or true, and political arrangements are not simply the result of a society's needs at a given moment. To the contrary: They are invariably the products of human thought and action, and as such they deserve careful scrutiny—applied with the recognition that things have been, and perhaps still could be, otherwise.

An important lesson in this regard, deftly demonstrated in Ryan's book, is that there was a time before the existence of every political idea—or at least before that idea became widely known. He notes, for instance, the early glimmers of what is now called social-contract theory, espoused by Glaucon, one of Socrates's interlocutors in *Republic*. That theory (which gains little traction in Plato's text) would lay mostly dormant in Western political thought for another two thousand years. And in Aristotle's case he points out—without anachronistically conscripting the philosopher as a democrat—that Book II of *Politics* offers something very close to the foundation of an argument for representative government. Aristotle, Ryan remarks, "had the right premises."

As Ryan notes, fully realized conceptions of political representation would not emerge until the modern era. What he makes clear is not that there was a thought—call it "representative democracy"—that germinated in Aristotle's era and traveled through the ages until it was perfected by James Madison. Instead, he suggests that certain political problems—such as how to enable self-government without turning the ship of state over to sailors who have never learned to navigate—tend to reemerge, in various forms, at different times and places. When that happens, the new generation confronting the old problem may or may not refer to the response of its ancestors. The American Founders, for one, were self-consciously involved in a highly ideological political project, and they had read their ancient philosophy. But the rest of us, to an extraordinary degree, are simply living in Aristotle's world whether we realize it or not.

Ryan's book helps us realize it. In the process, we see how similar we are to our predecessors—and how different from them. That much becomes clear in Ryan's discussions of such lesser-known thinkers as John of Salisbury, the twelfth-century writer whose *Policraticus* asserted that while a ruler's authority comes from God, it is nonetheless forfeited when exercised without justice. The latter half of that formulation advances an argument so familiar to present-day readers as to be almost unremarkable. But the first half's invocation of divine authority is a remnant of a strange and remote past—a signal both of the argument's audacity in its own era and its distance from ours. Ryan shows that the past's power to captivate and bewilder us is bound up with precisely this admixture of the familiar and the alien.

Ryan supplements his discussion with lively accounts of political and ecclesiastical developments in Europe, from the church reforms of the eleventh century to the rise of the papal states to the Reformation. (It is, of course, of central importance to the history of Western politics that political life and religious life were entwined for so long, and Ryan's account helpfully interweaves the intellectual, legal, and political dimensions of that history.) One rich and engaging chapter rescues Thomas Aquinas from the occasional dryness of scholasticism; another gives the early humanists admiring but not uncritical attention. At his best, Ryan writes with verve and warmth; when he advocates reading texts slowly and carefully, one imagines him savoring them like a fine cigar or glass of wine. His enthusiasm is infectious.

It also lends a sense of culmination to his work. One detects in Ryan's narrative few of the misgivings other writers have voiced about the advent of modernity, self-government, and rationalism. Yet his narrative nonetheless avoids triumphalism, which is all to the good: we should be able to describe real historical progress without glibly assuming that the remaining barriers to enlightenment will crumble in the face of technology, or rationalism, or efficient management, or some other trendy panacea. And while some readers may be tempted to scoff at the creaky doctrines of ancient thinkers, Ryan displays enough broad-mindedness—and historical sensitivity—to understand the reasons for their daunting intellectual remoteness. He takes "very seriously the thought that over the past two and a half centuries several revolutions dramatically changed the world that politics tries to master." Incredible, and incredibly rapid, changes in technology, demographics, literacy, and politics "have created a world that is in innumerable ways quite unlike the ancient, medieval, and early modern worlds." It follows that even if one accepts the essential sameness of human nature across time and place, the context

of human life has changed so drastically that it is now much harder to draw usable political morals from history—a favorite method of premodern political theorists.

Recognizing this, Ryan proceeds both as historian and as philosophical critic. His discussion of Tocqueville deftly weaves the French aristocrat's background and later political career into a discussion of *Democracy in America*, demonstrating how that masterpiece has been misread, or selectively read, by Americans. Marx is helpfully separated from the subsequent history of the Soviet Union, evaluated on his own terms as an intellectual and a theorist, and castigated for the lapses in his work. A more reflective tone emerges when Ryan turns to "the world after Marx," abandoning his chronological approach in favor of thematic chapters on such topics as empire, socialism, dictatorship, and democracy. He ends with a discussion of "the human future," treating questions of religion and secularization, nuclear war, globalization, world government, and humanitarian and environmental crises. These lucid and concise discussions are intended not to introduce new concepts to the reader but to bring up political problems that demand critical examination—perhaps along the lines of one of the approaches covered in the preceding pages.

That is a perfectly appropriate place for the book to end up. As Ryan knows, even the most historically and philosophically conscious political actors cannot simply draw lessons from the great theorists of the past, and if we look to Augustine or Mill or Hegel for direct answers to our questions, we'll likely come away disappointed. But that is not so much a defect of political theory as a reality of politics. Politics does not generate precisely correct answers the way mathematics does, and we may never agree on the ultimate goals of political life, much less how we ought to realize them. Still, there are better and worse ways to have that conversation, and to be historically illiterate and philosophically unreflective is demonstrably, unquestionably worse.

With *On Politics* Alan Ryan has proved that point while providing readers with a tool for addressing it. His engrossing historical survey achieves a happy marriage of accessibility and intelligence that we are unlikely to come across again any time soon. Explaining the role of political theorists (a task, he rightly notes, that political theorists themselves are notoriously bad at), Ryan describes them as "engaged in productive, if sometimes frustrating, conversations across the centuries with their long-dead predecessors, as well as their contemporaries. They want anyone who might be interested to overhear these conversations and join in." Readers of his genial and majestic book are well-advised, and well equipped, to do so. ■

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Robin Darling Young

Quiet Revolution

Through the Eye of a Needle

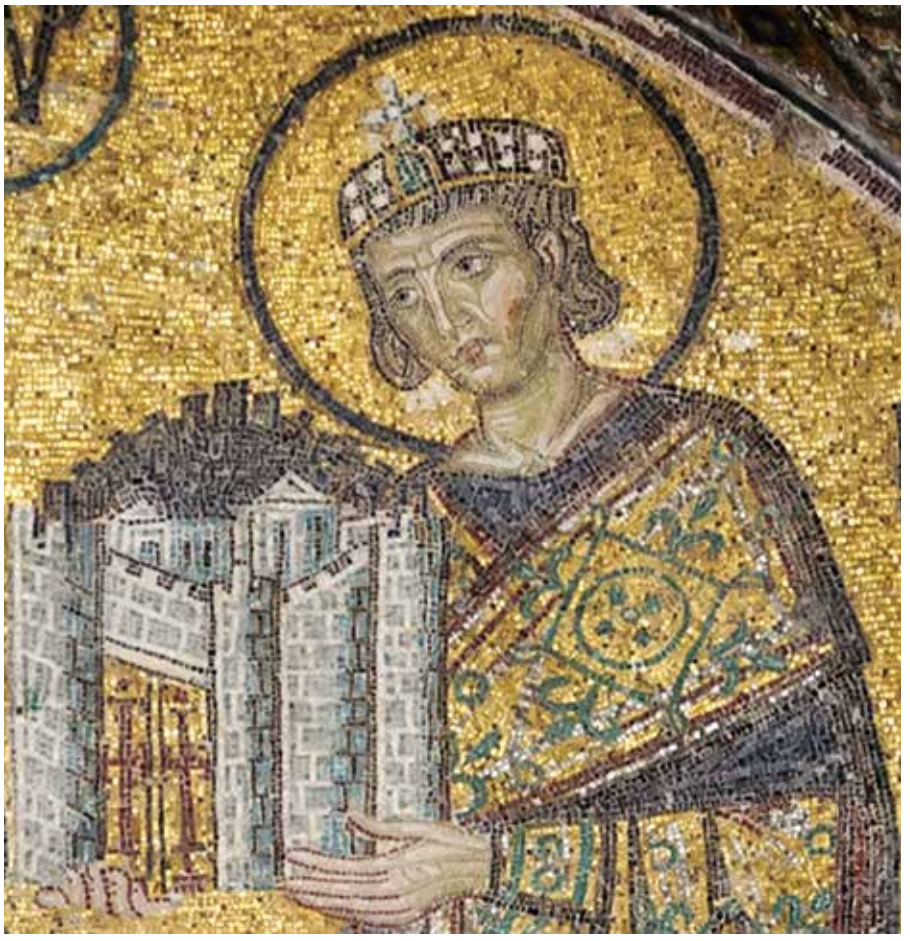
Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD

Peter Brown

Princeton University Press, $39.95, 759 pp.

A visitor to the city of Rome in the year 300 A.D. could traverse it without encountering one single building identifiable as Christian. It wasn't that the Christian community wasn't sizeable—indeed, the bishop of the city was already administering a large staff, distributing food to the poor, and communicating regularly through letters and emissaries with churches in other regions. But in Rome, as throughout the empire, churches were modest buildings, often in the style of domestic architecture, and could have easily been mistaken for private domiciles.

That was all about to change. A mere thirty years later, a visitor to Rome could not have missed the large buildings—such as the church on the site of the Lateran palace, dedicated to St. John—where newly public liturgies took place amid conspicuous splendor. Constantine's benefactions to the Christian congregations in Rome paralleled larger gifts to those in Constantinople and in Jerusalem, where there were few Christians until Constantine established the city as a site commemorating the Resurrection, with a future as a pilgrimage destination and monastic homeland. His largesse legitimized Christianity's public life while signaling its accumulation of riches and increasing exercise of power over the subjects and citizens of the empire. In this reading, Constantine's victory over his rivals led to Christianity's victory over Roman society and its conversion into a wealthy institution.



Mosaic of Emperor Constantine I in the Hagia Sophia

The eminent historian Peter Brown devotes the 700-plus pages of his absorbing new book to showing that this account is inadequate and untrue. In his telling, Christianity did not become the dominant religion thanks to Constantine; indeed, it did not gain vast property or become a distributor of largesse until more than sixty years later, during the reign of the emperor Theodosius. Certainly, Constantine legalized and enriched those Christian churches persecuted under his predecessor, Diocletian. But his aim, according to Brown, was never to establish the church as the sole religion of the empire. A Christian ruler, Constantine nonetheless repurposed a triumphal arch in Rome to celebrate his victories, much as his pagan predecessors had done; he did not prohibit the temples, but placed Christian ones beside them. In Brown's view, the emergence of Christianity as an institution of wealth and distributor of charity began later, and took longer to develop, than is commonly believed—and Constantine could hardly have foreseen this development, let alone planned it.

Brown's book covers two centuries in the life of Christianity and of the Roman Empire. His vast learning, accumulated over the course of nearly fifty years of published scholarship, helps flesh out this period so that readers can feel not just its ideas and preoccupations, but its shape and weight. *Through the Eye of a Needle* undertakes to demonstrate how, in the years from 350 to 550, the church in the West accomplished two great shifts. The first was the changeover from public benefactions to care of the poor, by which the wealthy now extended their munificence to the poverty-stricken, who depended on charity to fend off starvation. Previously, and

following ancient Roman custom, the wealthy had arranged for displays of public-spirited distribution of wealth, and expected to be repaid by gratitude, loyalty, and commemoration on monuments. As Christians, they now poured their wealth into the church instead, to be directed to the church's own ministries—ministries determined, in large part, by biblical injunctions to treat the poor with justice.

The second shift involved the collapse of Roman institutions that redistributed wealth. Before about 350, mediating wealth involved such practices as distributing imported grain to a hungry population. Now, the new institutions of the church—the strong metropolitan bishop and the monastic houses—were the repositories of wealth and the distributors of charity; they also became the first public hospitals. And as the central administration of the Roman Empire collapsed, this vacuum at the center all but forced regional churches and monasteries to form a network to replace Roman regional and civic organizations. Thus emerged the institutions upon which medieval Christianity was founded in Western Europe.

Through the Eye of a Needle takes Brown and his readers back to the world of his first book, *Augustine of Hippo*. In fact, we meet Augustine again, in his role as a preacher in fifth-century Africa. We meet other luminaries of his age as well, leaders of Christianity and architects of its wealth, whom Brown presents in a series of portraits. This book is long—like the amassing of wealth itself, it has taken time—and Brown divides it into five sections. Part One encompasses the period from the end of the third century to the end of the fourth. Brown shows that Christianity's emergence into the public sphere did not begin with Constantine and the Edict of Milan. Christians were already present at the court of Diocletian; in fact, the Great Persecution was allegedly set off by the sacrilegious act of one of those Christians, crossing himself against a "demonic" god and arousing the fear and then the retribution of the emperors.

Apart from these persecutions, Christians and pagans mingled mostly peaceably in the world of the third century. (The era's crises had other causes: unstable imperial rule, economic woes, and the press of the resurgent Persian Empire.) The tribal invasions of the north and west were still a century away, and these two groups, while different in worship and custom, shared much the same social profile—although there were few Christians among the senatorial class. Most, for now anyway, were of the middle class; only subsequently, during the fourth century, did they manage to move into the upper classes—by converting the fabulously wealthy—and to gain control of the government.

These achievements led to the redeployment of wealth away from civic monuments and, via the prophetic books of the newly authoritative Scriptures, toward charity for the poor. Brown writes that following "the absorption of the language and history of the Hebrew Scriptures in the Christian communities between the fourth and sixth centuries.... The poor were not simply others—creatures who trembled on the margins of society, asking to be saved by the wealthy. Like the poor of Israel, they were also brothers. They had the right to 'cry out' for justice in the face of oppressors along with all other members of the 'people of God.'" Thus Brown records the turn of the wheel: the days of grandeur for its own sake had passed, and now grandeur was redeployed in churches whose orientation was toward the supernatural realm, guided by their Scriptures and traditions. The triumph of Christianity comes not thanks to Constantine, but rather to Theodosius, through whose *Cunctos populos* the Roman world was to become Christian, and Nicene Christian at that. And its duty, as John Chrysostom over in Antioch kept instructing his listeners, was to feed the poor.

The second section of *Through the Eye of a Needle* discusses this change through the lives of Symmachus, Ambrose, Augustine, Ausonius, Paulinus, Jerome, the clergy of Rome, and the wealthy Christian ascetic women who spread their largesse to particular leaders and

to the churches as well. These biographies chronicle the personalizing of wealth management, disclosing that only through power, authority, and above all, rhetoric, did the church come to inherit the wealth of empire. The book's third part, "An Age of Crisis," surveys the fifth century and the breakup of the Western empire into regional kingdoms. Brown has traversed this territory before, in *The Rise of Western Christendom*, insisting against Gibbon that there was no decline and fall of an empire weakened by Christianity, but rather a transition to regional states that would in their way lay the groundwork for medieval Europe. Part Four, "Aftermaths," takes the cases of Gaul and Italy to look at the successors to the empire; and Part Five, "Toward Another World," looks at the sixth century and points to the little European kingdoms to come.

This book serves as a summation of, and key to, previous works of Peter Brown's that together have formed both a field of inquiry—Late Antiquity—and a large cadre of disciples who now are scholars themselves. Brown has gone back over territory familiar to his readers of forty-plus years: the life of Augustine, the world of the later empire, the beginnings of Christianity in the West, the history that is neither material culture nor theology nor intellectual history, nor church history, but the history of a religious world in a structuralist sense. How, he asks, did it work? Brown reads the history cheerfully, with an eye for what was happening at the margins, where bishops and rulers of the future were constructing something new. *Through the Eye of a Needle* takes us back to a time when most Christians probably agreed, with Clement of Alexandria, that the division between rich and poor was permanent; a time when the class system of empire, like slavery, was taken for granted, and not every monk was poor. It is a book about wealth, and to possess it is to be the owner of a kind of wealth as well. ■

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Sherif Girgis

A Useless Concept?

Dignity
Its History and Meaning
Michael Rosen
Havard University Press, $21.95, 200 pp.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights invokes it. So do the Geneva Conventions, the German constitution, and major U.S. Supreme Court cases. It is central to both the Kantian moral tradition and Catholic social thought. And along with cognate concepts, it's the favored principle of a broad range of causes: for the prenatal child's right to be born and the ailing geriatric's right to be killed; for looser immigration laws and tighter labor laws; for the regulation of pornography, prostitution, and hate speech; and libertarian resistance to the same. No concept has been more central to human-rights thought and advocacy than dignity.

So, if there is any philosophical concept on which we need insight and clarity, this is it. Yet most contemporary thinkers only bring it up to put it down. For the philosopher Ruth Macklin, "dignity is a useless concept"; Steven Pinker calls it "squishy, subjective" and "stupid." Most thinkers today can't even be bothered to show it abuse. And most of its few favorable treatments are too academic to have much effect on public debates.

Into that unfortunate breach steps Harvard Professor of Government Michael Rosen. In *Dignity: Its History and Meaning*, Rosen delivers an engaging reflection on the pedigree, politics, and promise of our moral and legal culture's go-to concept. Given the topic's salience, Rosen aims to keep the book widely accessible. His effort succeeds, but to uneven effect. *Dignity* is most helpful as an introduction to its title concept's scattered origins and conflicted meanings and applications. But his affirmative moral arguments about what human dignity is and what it requires, while occasionally illuminating, are finally unpersuasive.

Unlike much academic philosophy today, the book is properly rooted in history. Starting with the ancient world, Rosen pays close attention to the various things "dignity" has meant. To begin

UN General Assembly on the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

CNS PHOTO / ESKINDER DEBEBE, COURTESY UN

with, it has meant social rank, which varies from one person to the next. But since the time of Cicero, if not earlier, it has also signified something that all human beings (and only human beings) have equally. The third sense of "dignity" denotes the special value that something has "on account of itself," in Aquinas's language—or, in Kant's, the "internal" value that makes a thing "irreplaceable." And then there is "dignity" as a certain aesthetic quality of behavior: elegance, poise, or, for Schiller, "tranquility in suffering."

This taxonomy is crucial for avoiding errors, but Rosen himself sometimes overlooks it. Thus, he notes that Leo XIII affirmed variously nested authorities for social order, and infers from this that the nineteenth-century pope denied what the late-twentieth-century Catholic Church affirmed—namely, the equal dignity of all human beings. But is social authority not compatible with a more radical equality of dignity? Does all government violate equality? Indeed, if belief in this more radical sense of dignity as equality is indicated by belief in the inviolability of certain rights and corresponding duties, then surely the Catholic Church is among the oldest and most consistent defenders of dignity. From its inception, the church has defended certain moral absolutes—for example, against intentional killing of innocents—as minimum requirements of respecting the human good.

But just how is it that dignity and human rights relate to each other? Rosen spends the rest of the book examining this question, as a political and philosophical matter. His main quest is for an account of dignity that explains three things: first, what it means that we have equal and inviolable dignity; second, how this dignity gives rise to inalienable rights; and third, just which rights it gives rise to.

At the start of this search, the book hits its philosophical stride. It raises hard questions about a modern reading of Kant, according to which respecting a person's dignity means respecting his goals just because he has chosen them. This, Rosen points out, would make it hard to account for the value and rights of human beings who cannot, here and now, make choices. It would also make others' goals the only constraint on our own, leaving no room for moral absolutes. Finally, it couldn't explain the value of the person herself except by circular appeal to her own choice.

To reinforce the difficulties, Rosen tries to apply this and other conceptions of dignity to hard moral cases—like the choice of whether to shoot down a hijacked plane or risk more loss of life on the ground—and finds them all wanting. None, he thinks, can explain just what, concretely, dignity calls for, exactly what rights it bestows on those who have it. But it's here that Rosen's book could use more analytic rigor. His rejections of various conceptions of dignity as unworkable or implausible read more like reports of his conclusions than summaries of his reasoning. All this leads him to suggest that in interpreting and applying legal requirements of respect for dignity, we put more emphasis on the duty to treat others with dignity: that is, in ways that express respect. He ends by investigating this duty.

Because he thinks we owe it to corpses, he thinks it isn't owed only to human persons. Nor do we owe it to corpses just because they *used* to be persons, for Rosen thinks we should also treat with dignity the corpses of fetuses, whom he considers sub-personal. On these intuitions—that we owe fetal as well as adult corpses respect, and that the former never were persons—Rosen hangs his highly idiosyncratic analysis of the duty to treat with dignity. As he concludes, "We have a duty to treat a corpse with dignity just because one of the ways in which we have a duty to act is that we should perform acts that are expressive of our respect." He clarifies that these are not duties to other people, or to former people, or even to ourselves. They are not grounded in the value of anyone's "humanity" at all.

But in that case, is it simply a coincidence that the only nonhuman things Rosen lists as requiring such respect, human corpses, are so closely related to humanity? He says that we have a duty

to show them respect "just because" we have a duty to act in ways that express our respect. But our respect of what? Without an answer to that question, we are left with a truism: we have a duty to show respect in the ways that our duty to show respect demands.

Rosen owes us strong reasons to believe such a novel account. But the reasons he gives for believing his view and rejecting its alternatives are spotty. We come in at the tail end of a thoughtful man's internal monologue: he hasn't the time or interest to recount what we've missed, but he'll let us overhear the conclusion. Perhaps this is the result of Rosen's worthy desire to serve a broad audience, but it ends up undermining that service.

Still, Rosen's hasty philosophical search and questionable conclusion is intellectually instructive. It was guided all along by the assumption, articulated but hardly examined, that a good theory of dignity would explain not only how we all have it (equally), and how it grounds certain rights, but which rights it grounds. Here at least Rosen's book isn't novel at all, for this is an errand on which modernity has been embarked since Kant.

But is it, finally, a fool's errand? At one point Rosen quotes a passage from *Veritatis splendor* that can be read to imply as much:

> It is in light of the dignity of the person—a dignity which must be affirmed for its own sake—that reason grasps the specific moral value of certain goods towards which the person is naturally inclined. And since the person cannot be reduced to a freedom which is self-designing but entails a particular spiritual and bodily structure, the primordial moral requirement of loving and respecting the person as an end and never as a mere means also implies, by its very nature, respect for certain fundamental goods, without which one would fall into relativism and arbitrariness.

Here John Paul II suggests that, while human dignity—whatever it is—grounds our general moral obligation to serve human goods, these human goods depend on humanity's nature (its "particular spiritual and bodily structure"). We have obligations to any being with dignity, but just what we owe it is a separate question, a question about what fulfills its nature.

Kant—and with him, Rosen—tried to tease out human rights from whatever feature makes us subjects of rights at all. Another approach—that of Aristotle and Aquinas, as well as John Paul II—would treat these as separate inquiries. It is one thing to say what would harm a certain being, quite another to say which beings we have duties not to harm. This much we can learn from Rosen's survey of attempts (including his own) to do without that distinction. ■

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Conor Williams

Pride Before a Fall

The Eve of Destruction

James T. Patterson
Basic Books, $28.99, 344 pp.

Political liberals may find comfort in the disarray of today's Republican Party. But it wasn't so long ago that their own troubles set the stage for the Reagan Era. Historian James T. Patterson skillfully chronicles that period in *The Eve of Destruction*.

Here's how bad it's gotten for the GOP: Republican presidential candidates have gotten to 50 percent of the vote just once since the 1980s. More alarming for conservatives, the GOP base is shrinking as it struggles to make inroads with blacks, Latinos, women, and young people. Perhaps more surprising, liberal hopes aren't built on conservative disorder. They have a two-term president, who used his second inaugural address to argue that individual liberty rests on strong communal institutions. Here, after years of conservative dominance, was a Democratic president aiming to reframe U.S. political debates in liberal terms.

Of course, Obama inspired similar excitement in 2008. But much of that hope was crushed by the weight of an obstructionist Congress. Some liberals began to yearn for a Lyndon B. Johnson. Top Johnson aide Joseph Califano suggested that Obama would do well to emulate LBJ, "the most effective progressive president of the twentieth century," a man "always poised to grasp any opportunity to achieve his legislative objectives." A twenty-first-century LBJ, disappointed liberals insist, would never surrender leverage by, for example, publicly refusing to invoke the Fourteenth Amendment during the debt-ceiling battle. In comparison with Johnson's confident leadership, Obama looks cautious to the point of weakness.

Are those liberals right? Should Obama emulate the hard-charging Texan? Patterson's *The Eve of Destruction* serves as a caution against nostalgia for LBJ. To begin, the two men share more than many recognize. In general, Patterson writes,

> LBJ sought to avoid protracted fights with powerful opponents or interest groups. He continued to be a liberal who believed that the federal government should advance equal opportunity; he was not a radical or social democrat who sought to tame Big Business, fight against income inequality, ensure equal economic outcomes for people, or guarantee a host of special rights and entitlements.

Patterson argues that Johnson's successes had less to do with personal toughness or ideological purity and more to do with circumstance. In 1965, LBJ didn't face grassroots opposition like the Tea Party, let alone Fox News. Rather, that period's strongest movements sup-

YOICHI R. OKAMOTO, WHITE HOUSE PRESS OFFICE (WHPO)

Secretary of State Dean Rusk, President Lyndon B. Johnson, and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, February 9, 1968

ported LBJ's agenda. If he moved public opinion on civil rights, it was in a supporting role. The real work was done by civil-rights activists across the South. Of course, Johnson took full advantage of the moment. He eventually bullied Congress into passing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Medicare and Medicaid, the Voting Rights Act, and much more.

But in time it became clear that with every progressive victory, Johnson was laying the foundation for the Age of Conservatism. Conservatives took to journals like the *Public Interest* to argue that LBJ's War on Poverty was well intentioned but deeply misguided. Slowly but surely, they began convincing Americans that poverty and related social problems were too complex to be solved by the federal government. In 1965, Patterson notes, more than 75 percent of Americans trusted the government "to do right most of the time." Ten years later, the number had dropped to 38 percent.

Of course, Americans' mistrust of government wasn't solely caused by conservative elites. By the end of 1965, American liberalism was thoroughly tied to the war in Vietnam. As Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) president Carl Oglesby put it during a November 1965 protest in Washington, D.C.:

> We are here again to protest a growing war. Since it is a very bad war, we acquire the habit of thinking it must be caused by very bad men.… We must simply observe, and quite plainly say, that this coalition, this blitzkrieg, and this demand for acquiescence are creatures, all of them, of a government that since 1932 has considered itself to be fundamentally liberal.

While that was a radical position at the time, it would not remain so for long. More troops and bombing sorties did little to improve matters. Johnson—correctly—became convinced that transparency about the war threatened his domestic agenda. The more Americans learned about their country's involvement in Vietnam, the less they trusted leaders acting in their name.

If 1965 was political liberalism's high point, Patterson provides compelling evidence that it also marked the beginning of the cultural movement we've come to call "the '60s." Anti-Vietnam protests, the civil-rights movement, and other radical movements dramatically expanded. Students for a Democratic Society had fewer than fifteen members in 1964—it would soon have nearly eighty thousand. Aesthetic norms were changing too—in August 1966, the Beatles' *Revolver* permanently reshaped the band's image and stretched the boundaries of popular music. America's politics may have been tilting away from liberalism, but cultural and personal liberation still continued apace. Conservative political ideas may have dominated the Reagan Era, but today's GOP still hasn't come to terms with the social and cultural pluralism that grew out of the 1960s. This may prove as challenging as the party's demographic struggles.

The Eve of Destruction offers few lessons for liberals longing for a new political era. Johnson's headstrong style wasn't all that damaged mid-century liberalism. Obviously the Vietnam War did enormous damage. Like Obama, Johnson inherited foreign-policy problems from his predecessors. Both presidents staked their reputation on escalation. But if Obama is remembered as a transformational president, it won't be because of his war policy. It will be because he replaced the Reagan Era's conservative narrative with one that revivified U.S. liberalism. Should Obama succeed, conservatives will look to their Reagan Era hubris with the same wistfulness that seizes liberals reflecting on 1965. ■

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Service Entrance

William J. Byron

Long after his political career had ended, the unsuccessful presidential candidate George Romney, father of the unsuccessful Republican candidate Mitt, became an advocate for national service. He often said that "national service should be as visible as the Post Office." George Romney wanted national service in various forms—not just military service, but also elder care, child care, conservation of natural resources, and rebuilding of the national infrastructure—to become part of our culture, integral to the American way of life. I think it's time to take another look at this idea, which could revitalize the country and relieve the economic pressure on its youth.

Everyone knows there was compulsory military service during the Second World War. In exchange for each month spent in the military, veterans of that war were entitled to two months of higher or vocational education—tuition, fees, and books—in independent or public institutions of their choice, paid for by the federal government. This was the so-called GI Bill of Rights, enacted into law because members of Congress feared that there would be widespread unemployment when the veterans of World War II retuned to civilian life. It turned out to be the greatest investment in human capital ever made in this country. And the return to Treasury—the higher taxes paid because of the higher incomes earned as a result of a more educated workforce—has been enormous. In effect, the program proved over the long run to be self-financing.

Young men between eighteen and twenty-six years of age had no choice. If they were physically and mentally fit, they had to serve. It was a national emergency. Two words provided the rationale for compulsory service: Pearl Harbor. It would take a lot more than two words to come up with a rationale for a compulsory national-service program today, but the case should at least be made.

If a compulsory two-year national-service law were applicable now to all American men and women between the ages of eighteen and twenty, and if the areas of service included nonmilitary opportunities like tutoring low-income children, cleaning up neglected urban neighborhoods, and participating in conservation projects, it would immediately have a major impact on the country.

But another good reason for compelling national service is the evident predicament of so many young people today, who are faced with the exorbitant cost of higher education and poor job prospects. In many cases, this leads to drift and a sense of purposelessness. Their parents see it; those who counsel them in high school or advise them in college see it. The data collected on drug abuse, crime, and youth suicide all point to the problem. Does it amount to a national emergency? I think it does.

After World War II many veterans took advantage of educational opportunities that prepared them for productive careers. They gained maturity and a sense of purpose during their service years. The nation benefited not only from their service but as much or even more from their subsequent careers, made all the more productive thanks to education gained under the GI Bill. Of course, other things helped fuel postwar economic growth, but the GI Bill played a big role.

President Barack Obama should ask his domestic policy advisers to take a good look at national service. He and Congress will no doubt be preoccupied with the challenge of reducing the nation's long-term debt. Still, it would be wise for him to ask a select few policy advisers to compute the historic cost and the return on investment associated with the GI Bill, if for no other reason than to anticipate the criticism that would certainly be voiced about the cost of a new national-service program. The president has often spoken of the importance of investing in programs that will make the U.S. economy more competitive in the decades to come. Surely, national service is one such program.

The president's advisers could figure out how to arrange training and appropriate stipends for inductees into a national-service program and design private-public partnerships that would employ the inductees to meet national needs. They could work out the types and terms of postservice educational benefits, to which every service member would have a claim. These benefits would help ease the crippling burden of student debt, which is leading even people with good jobs to wait many years before buying a home or starting a family.

The nation has serious needs that neither the market nor current public programs are meeting: a neglected infrastructure, a growing population of retirees, a public-education system that is failing children from low-income families. The nation also has a growing number of unemployed young adults who could help solve these problems if only we asked them to—and made it worth their while. The country needs what young people offer; young people need what the country could offer. This is a coincidence too important to ignore. ■

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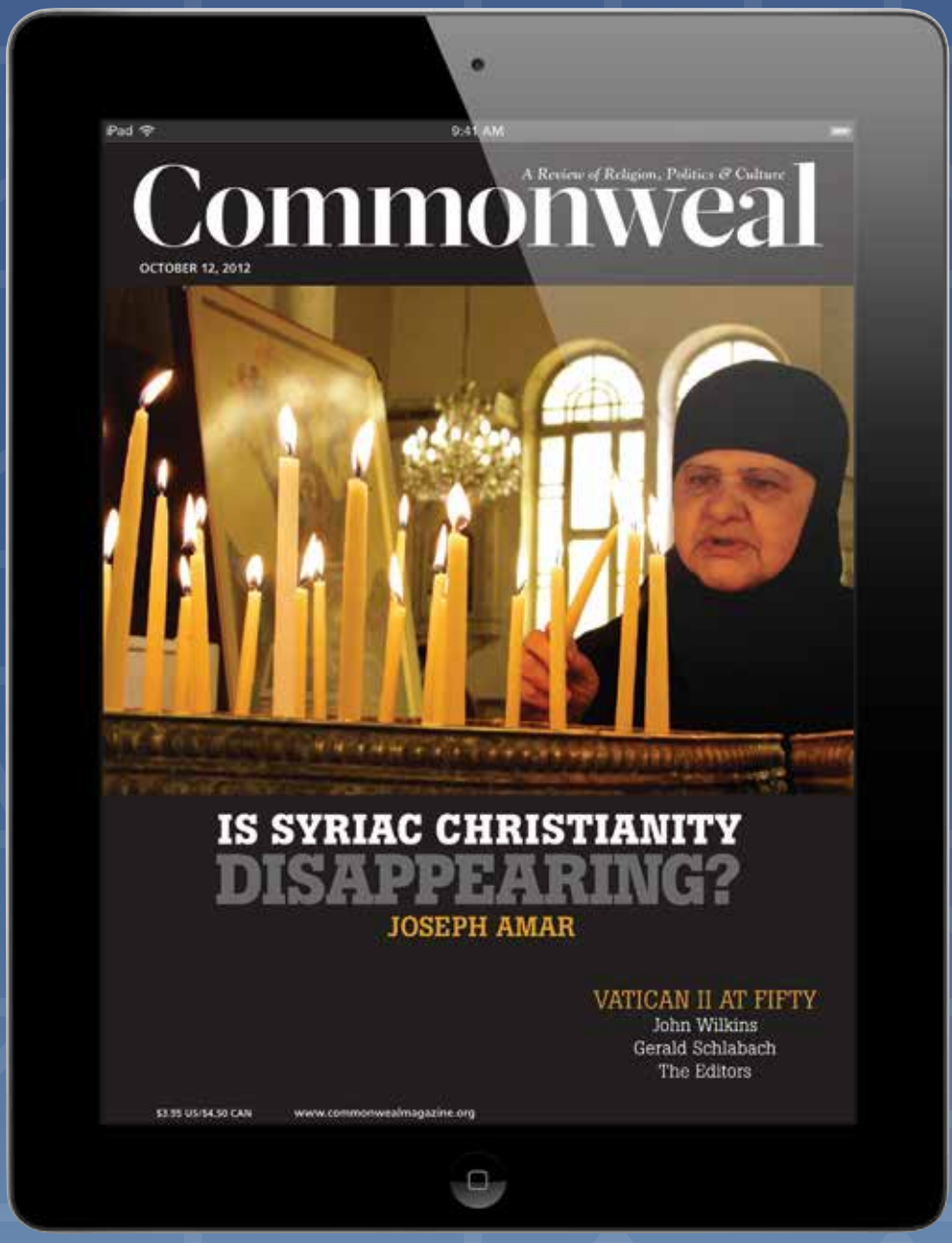

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