

A close-up portrait of Paul Cantor, an older man with grey hair and glasses, smiling. He is wearing a patterned suit jacket and a striped tie. The background is blurred, showing some greenery and a building.

The Austrian

A PUBLICATION OF THE MISES INSTITUTE

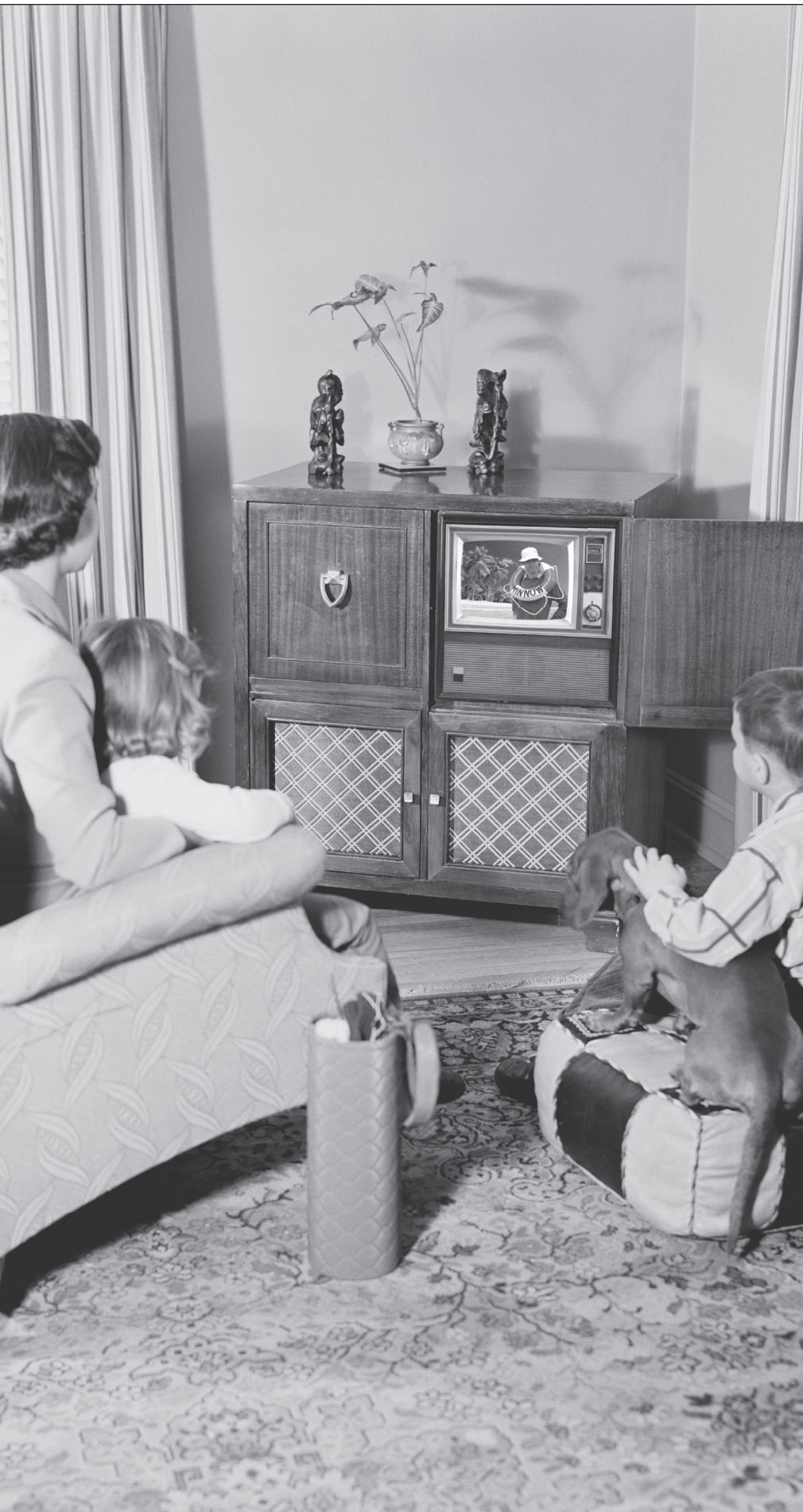
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PAUL
CANTOR

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on Literature, Culture,
& Economics



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From the publisher

Jeff Deist

If you are not familiar with Professor Paul Cantor, be prepared to enjoy our cover interview with this remarkable scholar.

Cantor reveals he was only a teenager when he met Mises, Hayek, Hazlitt, and Rothbard in New York. A humble kid from Brooklyn, he was deeply impressed by the intelligence and stature of such impressive men. Curious and precocious, the young Cantor read *Human Action* cover to cover. He excelled in math as a high school student, and made excellent grades in all subjects — but having witnessed Mises's salon he knew only an intellectual life would make him happy.

So he headed off to Harvard, studied English literature, and became a professor.

Yet he never forgot about economics, and in fact continued to deepen his knowledge of the Austrian school. The result has been a highly unique career applying insights from economics to his work as a literary and cultural critic.

Cantor now has spent more than four decades teaching humanities at the University of Virginia, and is well-positioned to assess the state of both academia and the students themselves. Both are in trouble, in his view, but perhaps not for the reasons you might expect.

Yes, leftwing bias and endless fake hyphenated “studies” courses are a huge problem on campus. So is the rapid growth of useless administrative positions and diversity officers.

But the problems run deeper, and start earlier. Many bright young people go to “good” public high schools, or private schools if their parents can afford it. They do well on all the standardized tests, and earn a high (though inflated) GPA. They perform all the rote extracurricular activities expected of them, and obtain acceptance into highly-ranked universities. Some even make it into the Ivy Leagues.

But both their high school and university educations fail them. Most graduate and head out into the world knowing little or nothing about history, philosophy, literature, rhetoric,

classics, music, or languages. They cannot name a single important WWII battle. They cannot point to Afghanistan on a map, or recite a poem, or describe anything about the architecture of their campus buildings. And needless to say many never learn to cook, maintain personal finances, or change a tire.

Can we truly say they are educated, in the sense Professor Cantor understands the word? The brightest among them head off to become lawyers or doctors, and to jobs in government, finance, media, or tech — but without the essential knowledge and critical thinking skills their grandparents learned in high school. And oftentimes with tens or hundreds of thousands in student loan debt.


The Mises Institute is an important alternative to this dying educational model. We are the free university, open to anyone, any age, anywhere, any time — all through the remarkable content available at mises.org. Like Mises's seminar, programs like our Rothbard Graduate Seminar provide an amazing, interactive contrast to the dull lectures taking

“The pseudo-liberals monopolize the teaching jobs at many universities. Only men who agree with them are appointed as teachers and instructors of the social science, and only textbooks supporting their ideas are used.”

— Ludwig von Mises
Planning for Freedom

place across the street at Auburn University. And our summer Mises University has become famous around the world for educating and energizing students in just one intense week.

All of us have a responsibility to the future, to work on behalf of those young people who want something different. Even in our dumbed-down, short-attention-span era of social media and soundbites, there are young people thirsty for intellectual growth. Reaching them is a big part of our mission.

Will we see you later this year, at events in Auburn, Seattle, New York City, Los Angeles, or Ron Paul's hometown of Lake Jackson, Texas? Go to mises.org/events and make plans to join us. As always, we ask that you stay connected with the Mises Institute and our critical mission of bringing real economics to the next generation. 

Jeff Deist is president of the Mises Institute.



PAUL CANTOR

Literature, Culture, & Economics

JEFF DEIST: The last time the Mises Institute interviewed you was way back in 2001, for what was then called the *Austrian Economics Newsletter*. That interview discusses how you met Ludwig von Mises and read *Human Action* at a very young age.

PAUL CANTOR: Yes. My brother was studying with Sylvester Petro at NYU Law School and Petro was a friend of Mises, and a kind of disciple, and the only labor law professor who didn't like unions. Anyway, he had his students read Mises and that way it filtered down to me. My brother's eight years older than I am and so I started reading Mises. I definitely read *Human Action*. I know I read *Socialism*. I think I read *The Theory of Money and Credit*.

I had a friend in high school who was interested in it and we both got interested in reading Mises. At one point, he said, "let's call him up," as kind of a dare. "If he's in the Manhattan phone book, we'll call him up." I can't believe we did this, but Mises was very gracious about it, had us come to his office and talk to us, and then invited us to join the seminar. So, this would be fall of '61, my senior year in high school. I actually would have been 15 at the time. I didn't turn 16 until the end of October. I attended, I think,

Dr. Paul A. Cantor is Clifton Waller Barrett Professor of English at the University of Virginia. He is the author of several books, including *Pop Culture and the Dark Side of the American Dream: Con Men, Gangsters, Drug Lords, and Zombies* and *The Invisible Hand in Popular Culture: Liberty vs. Authority in American Film and TV*. He is the co-editor, with Stephen Cox, of *Literature and the Economics of Liberty*.

every meeting of the seminar for the fall and the spring semester and it was a wonderful experience.

I have vivid memories of Mises to this day. He was always impeccably dressed. He had manners which I would now describe in retrospect as Viennese courtliness. I didn't know what a Viennese gentleman looked like, at the time, but having since been to Vienna, I can recognize the way he carried himself. He was always elegant, and I remember his sparkling eyes, which struck me very much at the time. He was 80 when I met him, but he had the eyes of a young man. They still sparkled and he was obviously the most intelligent person I'd met in my life to that point. And to this day, he remains certainly one of them, one of the best teachers I've ever seen. He was utterly lucid. What I admired most about him was his steel trap logical mind.

I was kind of peculiar at the time, my favorite reading was Euclid's *Elements*. So, I absolutely loved logical arguments and axiomatic ones. That's one reason I think I was attracted to Mises's praxeology and his axiomatic approach to things. I think that comes across as very foreign to a lot of people, but to me, it seemed natural and the right way to approach things. He would, quite honestly, talk most of the time in the seminar. He would take questions, but he was so fluid in his presentation that I think people hesitated to interrupt them. Murray Rothbard, who was one of the students, he certainly did interrupt, and he and Mises had a good teacher-student relation. I think Mises enjoyed being challenged by Rothbard. I once had occasion to sit next to Mises, right next to him. I came in late. I normally, as a little kid, wouldn't have dared to do that, but it was the only remaining seat. I was quite struck. He had one 5 x 7 index card and he had just a series of little notes and clearly he had outlined what he wanted to cover, but he basically just could speak essentially off the cuff or present his ideas in a way that was very comprehensible to everybody in the room, including a little kid from high school.

JD: And this clarity of thought impressed you, even though he wasn't speaking in his native language?

PC: Yes, and I'm sure by then — this is 1962 — that he was utterly comfortable in English. He did have a distinct and somewhat heavy Viennese accent, but fortunately, here is where my brother came to my aid again. He had a friend whose parents immigrated from Vienna and so I'd heard that Viennese accent a long time before I met Mises. So, I was tuned into it.

JD: You read *Human Action* at 14 or 15?

PC: Yes, I would think so. I was kind of a child tragedy. ... I guess I should say prodigy, but I just read too much as a kid. My parents had to throw me out of the house: "Go

I have vivid memories of Mises to this day. He was always impeccably dressed. He was 80 when I met him, but he had the eyes of a young man. They still sparkled and he was obviously the most intelligent person I'd met in my life to that point.

out and play." I just loved books. I was the same in literature. I was reading things like Dante's *Divine Comedy* at that time. I just loved books.

JD: Did Mises intimidate you, or did he take account of your tender age?

PC: Well, you know, he was inevitably intimidating by the mere fact that he was Ludwig von Mises and I recognized his stature and his genius. He was in no way intimidating personally. He was very genial and in retrospect, I'm struck by the fact that at age 80, he was still interested in young people and being able to teach them. I realized that was an incredible privilege I got there, to be able to sit in on this seminar. He was not an argumentative person in the sense

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

that he liked to get into arguments. He just would present his views logically and he basically relied on the logic of the arguments to carry the day. So, he never tried to intimidate anybody. There was no way, I would say, that he tried to exert his authority. His authority rested solely on the power of his arguments. So, again, I wasn't taking this as a course; I didn't interact with him in that sense, as a student, and I don't think I ever spoke up once in the seminar, but occasionally, I'd talk to him after class and I remember that with some fondness and he had a good sense of humor. He was a relatively small man, so he wasn't physically intimidating. He had a quiet voice, but

Henry Hazlitt was at virtually every meeting in the seminar. He usually sat next to Mises. And he did speak up and I knew very much who he was, reading his *Newsweek* columns in those days.

again, he did carry himself with great dignity and in that sense, he didn't want to mess around.

JD: In this same period you met Henry Hazlitt and Friedrich von Hayek at Mises's seminar. Give us your impressions.

PC: Again, I hesitate to use the word, "meet." I mean, Hazlitt was at virtually every meeting in the seminar. He usually sat next to Mises. Again, I'm not sure I ever spoke to him. I'm sorry to present myself as such a wilted violet. Again, he was exceedingly well dressed. These things make an impression on a 15 year-old from Brooklyn. And *he* did speak up and I knew very much who he was, reading his *Newsweek* columns in those days and I had read his famous books, at that point, including, for example, his book on Keynesian economics.

Hayek showed up only once and I, in some ways hesitate to get into this, but I will. I do remember vividly that he got into an argument with Murray Rothbard and it's a kind of funny story. People who have heard me tell this story have said that what I didn't know was that Hayek was hard of hearing at this point and that probably provoked this confrontation. But basically the seminar was on international economics and the issue of foreign exchange came up and the gold standard. Murray made a hypothetical argument, in which he said, "if I could convert these dollars to gold." Somehow Hayek thought that Murray thought that you could convert dollars to

gold in 1962. We were meeting down right off Wall Street in Lower Manhattan and I do remember this, that Hayek pulled a \$50 bill out of his pocket, and he said, "take this, the Federal Reserve Bank is two blocks away, go get me gold for this." Nothing really came of this and in retrospect, I think it was just Hayek mishearing a hypothetical as a statement of fact.

But it made a big impression on me, just to see. I didn't know how important Murray was going to grow up to be, but he definitely was the most vocal of all the people in that room and again, the one who would actually directly challenge Mises on some points. But, in any case, that's my encounter with Friedrich Hayek. The one other thing

I told people is that, I may have been reading something into this or projecting, but it did strike me that Mises and Hayek were still in a teacher-pupil relationship, even though one was in his 80s and one was in his 70s. Hayek was the more famous of the two, at that point, but I sensed the dynamic between them was that Hayek would defer to Mises. So, that's my one comment.

JD: They were born about 18 years apart, almost a generation then. So you were a young, precocious kid who happens to rub elbows with these great economists. But you decide to go off to Harvard and study English literature.

PC: It's actually not as simple as that, but precocity was my problem, and I was precocious in a lot of different fields. Honestly, I went to Harvard because of astronomy.

That's what I dreamed of. I wanted to be an astronomer originally and I read Harlow Shapley's *Of Stars and Men* and he was at Harvard and I had to go to Harvard. But meanwhile, I discovered Shakespeare, actually, when I was about 9 years old when my mother took me to some Shakespeare plays. But by high school, I was taking Shakespeare very seriously. I wrote my high school senior paper on *King Lear*, studied the plays, reading A.C. Bradley and I'd fallen in love with Shakespeare. And I do remember this at the time, and this is going to sound a bit strange, but I looked at *Human Action* and said, okay, here's economics. This guy, Ludwig von Mises has done it. And like I said, I don't want to seem to denigrate every Austrian economist since Mises, but my reaction was, I don't see where I could contribute in this field and I'll invoke the law of comparative advantage here and say, I thought I was doing some interesting stuff on Shakespeare.

But I must say, I always regretted that I had this great training from Mises and had not put it to use, so I am very happy, in retrospect, to realize I was able to find a way to apply Austrian economics to literature. It all began with the Mises Institute's tenth anniversary essay contest, I wrote and submitted an essay on Thomas Mann, his story, "*Disorder and Early Sorrow* and the German Inflation," and won the contest. And from then on, I've done a lot to show how Austrian economics can be applied to culture. So, I feel now that I did not put to waste this privilege I had to study with Mises. And in a curious way, I like to say, I have opened up a new front on the war against socialism and left-wing economics and it's appropriate in the sense that the battleground has increasingly turned to culture. Socialism lost the economic argument against capitalism, although there are an awful lot of people running for office these days who don't seem to be aware of that fact. But really, culture became the last refuge, not just of scoundrels in general, but scoundrels on the Left. So, I feel I've been able to make a distinct contribution putting together what I've learned of Austrian economics with what I've learned about literature and more generally, about culture.

JD: I think you absolutely have. In the old interview I mentioned you have a great quote: "People come to literature because they're trying to learn something

about the world." So literature and economics have that in common.

PC: Well, it's true, although there's not been much good economic criticism on literature going way back. I mean, most of the criticism that takes into account economics, is Marxist. So many of the literary critics in the twentieth century, especially the ones known as the New Critics, grew out of Southern agrarianism and so, they thought that the whole world of the market is debased, and we shouldn't even talk about such things. So, it's an interesting case where I think the hard Left and I'll call it the hard Right, I mean, basically don't understand the role of commerce in culture.

JD: But as you say, it's a mistake to cede literary criticism to the Left.

PC: Oh, absolutely. And even more so in a way, pop culture criticism. I mean, that's another thing that I began to realize in the 1990s, that the Left had a monopoly, not just on the criticism of literature, but now film and television and all the popular arts. That also came from a tendency on the Right, to have a disdain for commercial culture and especially this whole sort of T.S. Eliot-style critic, who just looked down upon movies — certainly on television — and I realized that was a huge mistake because the future was in movies. Well, the past was already in movies at that point, but I began to realize in the 1990s that the future of art was in television and I've been vindicated in that judgment, even though colleagues would tell me, "oh television, I don't watch television," or "I don't own a television." At this point, I would feel like saying, "well you don't own a pair of glasses, so you don't read?" But in any case, I sensed they were missing out on what the future would be and especially the future for young people. And again, there was this deep irony that people who were speaking out in favor of capitalism, when it came to culture, thought that commerce could only debase culture. Quite frankly, the most viable argument with capitalism, by the 80s and 90s was a cultural one. The claim has been "okay, so capitalism does better for your bodies, but it corrupts your soul." And that's what I wish to argue against. I don't take single-handed credit for this, but I think I've had some important role to play, in the fact that libertarians and conservatives

have turned their attention to popular culture and realized it's an important battleground for ideas.

JD: There is an aesthetic critique of capitalism on the Left. Markets produce lowbrow art, crass consumerism, and so forth. Capitalism cares nothing for beauty. Aren't these progressive articles of faith, coming mostly from the Left?

PC: Oh, no, no. I mean, it is, but it's not the only way. Again, you just have to look at a whole tradition of conservative thinking largely associated with T.S. Eliot, and New Critics like Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn

It was estimated there were 40,000 Victorian novels, and 39,800 of them are terrible. We don't read them anymore, we know nothing about them and they're the equivalent of the worst television show you could ever find.

Warren. They were called Southern agrarians and they looked with contempt on the North and its industrialization. The reason they were called agrarians, they wanted to go back — perhaps they'd never left — to a nineteenth-century way of life, based on the farm. They were very anti-urban and these people are thought of as conservatives, but they have great contempt for modern popular culture.

Now, there's a lot that's contemptible in popular culture, but my point is always that there's a lot contemptible in any culture you'll ever find. In retrospect, we single out the great achievements of any given culture and forget that every culture has had its trash. I mean, we now look

back at the nineteenth-century novel and we see Dickens and Jane Austen and George Eliot and the Brontë sisters. But it was estimated there were 40,000 Victorian novels and 39,800 of them are terrible. We don't read them anymore, we know nothing about them and they're the equivalent of the worst television show you could ever find. It's the same for Shakespeare's theater. We go back and look at Shakespeare's plays and it's an unrivaled achievement in cultural history and we can add in the best plays of Ben Jonson and the best plays of Christopher Marlowe and a few more. But the bad stuff is unspeakably bad. The worst play I've ever read from the period is Robert Daborne's *A*

Christian Turned Turk and if you want to see something as bad as the worst TV show you've ever seen, read it. Its highlight is a live circumcision scene on the stage and it's as gross as anything you see in television today and it's presented comically, by the way. So, we have an illusion of time that we look back at the past and we only remember and sometimes only have the highlights of the period. At any point in culture, there's a vast spectrum from the lowest to the highest. When we look at the world today, we shouldn't be looking at these dumb reality shows we have on television or the dumb sitcoms. You look at *Deadwood* and you look at *Breaking Bad* and these are masterpieces and they will be viewed as such hundreds of years from now.

And again, most people who used to condemn popular culture, did it with no knowledge of what it was. "I've never watched television, but I know it's bad." You know, it's a strange notion, as if this is a matter of media. There are just as many bad books as there are bad television shows. You just have to walk into Barnes and Noble and see that. And people act as if the book is this high medium and television is this low medium. I will take the best show on television against the worst book in Barnes and Noble any day of the week. It's not as if books are inherently superior to television shows. It's just that again, we have this illusion that a lot of great books have been written, but they're completely outnumbered by the bad books written.

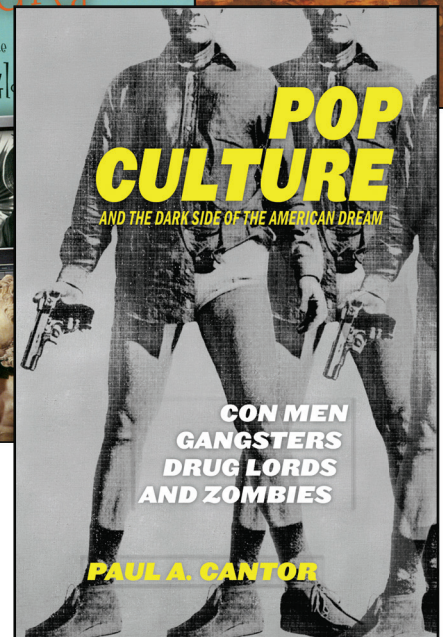
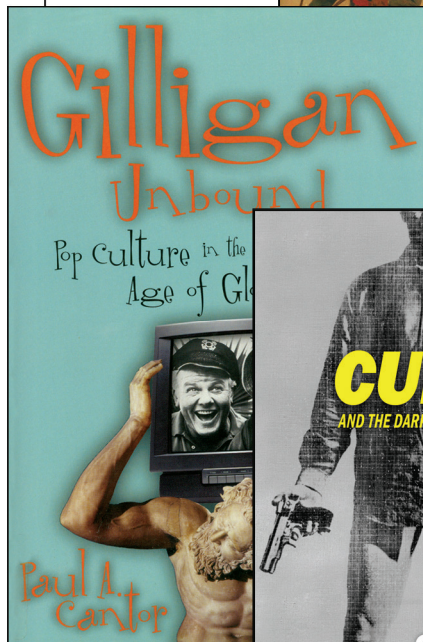
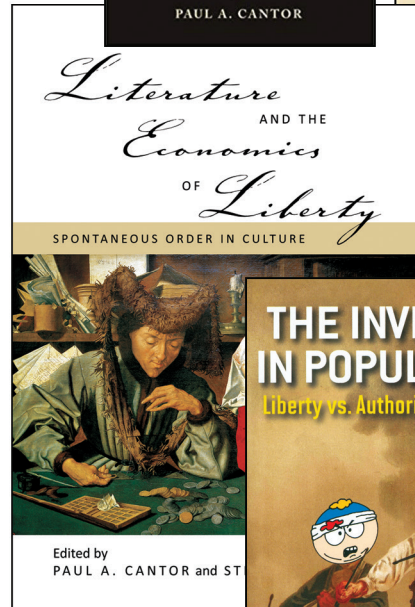
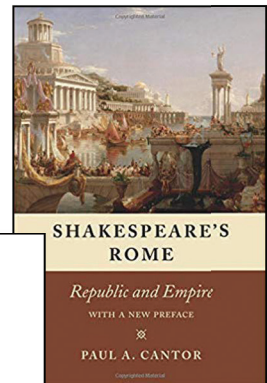
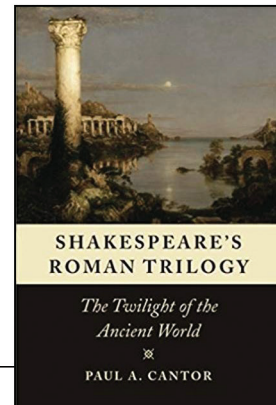
We kind of forget how low the medium of a book can go and people were warning against books. It was one of my most amazing discoveries that around 1830, there were all these things being written. “Books are harmful for you. Children shouldn’t be allowed to read books.” Part of it was, they’re not doing their chores because they’re reading a book and of course, a lot of it was the standard thing, there’s too much sex and violence in books. People always say that about any medium. But then, there’s actually a sermon by Matthew Arnold’s father, Thomas Arnold, the head of Rugby School, who gave a sermon saying, oh, these books, they’re brought out in installments and our students, they just can’t wait for the next installment and it’s ruining their week. They’re not doing their schoolwork because they wanted to find out what happens next in *The Pickwick Papers*. That’s just the argument made about television serials and I was quite surprised. I always assumed that books were attacked on their content, but the book was actually attacked as a medium in the early 1800s.

JD: Books were going to ruin the youth.

PC: And that was not by Marxists. That was by conservative moralists.

JD: You mentioned Dickens, who wrote popular serialized novels and wasn’t afraid to make a buck off it.

PC: Yes, he was quite proud to make a buck off it. And in my book, *Literature and the Economics of Liberty* — which I co-edited with Stephen Cox — I have a long essay on the serialized novel as an example of how commerce improves culture. The very fact that the novels were serialized meant Dickens was continually getting feedback and he would change the plot. If the number of installments sold jumped up, he would look and see, oh, this character is the reason, the people really liked Little Nell, I have to write Little Nell more into the story. That’s supposed to be the horror of professors of aesthetics. This is supposedly a corrupt procedure — an author giving in to his audience. But my point is, that the audience often has



the wisdom of crowds and can send an author in a good direction and Dickens's career is a good example of that and we see that in modern television series. In fact, many producers of shows pay attention to what the audience is saying. I've seen this most recently in this disastrous last season of *Game of Thrones*, where the audience was clamoring for a redo. They want the last season done over because it was so bad, and I think the audience is right. So, again, there's a kind of aristocratic pretension to a lot of aesthetic criticism that takes the point of view that only an elite can determine what culture should be like and there's something that could be said for that. I'm not going to attack the elites in the Renaissance who helped produce the paintings of Leonardo and Raphael and Michelangelo, but on the other hand, the record of commercial cultures is quite impressive and defensible as we've seen in fields such as Italian opera, Victorian novels, now in television, certainly in the movies, that artists who've appealed to a general public have not always done lousy works of art. I'm one of the few people to argue that in fact, in many cases, their art has been improved by paying attention to the audience. I would say, for example, with contemporary music, one of the reasons it's so bad and unlistenable is that composers end up in universities where they're cushioned from the marketplace. They're paid a salary and therefore, the more harsh and dissonant and incomprehensible their music sounds, the better they are judged to be and that's how they get their grants and draw in their salaries. They have no concern whether anyone will want to listen to their



music, especially now that they can't even think that a consideration is that people should enjoy the music, that they should come out whistling a nice tune, for example, or enjoying pleasant harmonies. And so, as a result, we've got music that's unlistenable and we're forced to hear that this is the great music of the day. In my view, anyone who's a serious composer has to go into writing movie music now, where they can get away with writing something that people would actually want to listen to.

JD: Mises makes this point in *The Anti-Capitalistic Mentality*. Who's to say art should never mix with commerce? What government bureaucrat is in a position to judge what people consume as entertainment? Mises believed in consumer sovereignty.

PC: Yes. I will say, Mises seemed to have had very elite cultural taste and I don't think he was making the argument that this popular art would actually be great.

JD: Right.

PC: I think he was just saying that we have no right to tamper with it. Maybe I'm wrong, but I think I've taken the argument a step further by saying that in fact, what's dismissed as lowbrow art, is not uniformly so. You will find diamonds in the rough and indeed, that's the nature of all culture.

JD: You've never been afraid to consider the merits of pop culture. Your seminal book in libertarian circles is *The Invisible Hand in Popular Culture*. You have a new book as well. Talk about both.

PC: OK. Let me start with the new book. It's called *Pop Culture and the Dark Side of the American Dream: Con Men, Gangsters, Drug Lords and Zombies*. And it's got a picture of Walter White from *Breaking Bad* in his underwear carrying a gun, on the cover. In fact, there are two Walter Whites in an effort to emulate Andy Warhol's Elvis double portrait. This book actually is an attempt to carry on what I was doing in *The Invisible Hand in Popular Culture* and I must say, I start from the premise that the American Dream is a reality. The book is about the dark side of the American Dream, which implies that there is a bright side. This isn't one of those books that just tries to trash the American Dream. I think it is real and that America has lifted more people out of

poverty and to success than any other country in history and if other countries now are doing bigger numbers, the reason is they're imitating the United States in its best respects. But I was interested in the fact that the public is interested in the dark side of the American Dream. And again, we have a long tradition in popular culture in what are called Horatio Alger stories, which is a very popular genre in the nineteenth and twentieth-century success stories. America loves the success story; America loves happy endings. We speak about Hollywood endings, how the story's supposed to come out right and for a long time, Americans were fascinated with books, and then movies, and even TV shows that show people, as we say, achieving the American Dream. That's having your own business, often a family business, securing the economic future of your family, getting the children a good education and again, that's a very archetypal American story.

At the same time, though, Americans have been fascinated with what happens when that story goes wrong and some of the most famous books and movies in American culture have shown the dark side of the American Dream. *The Great Gatsby* is a wonderful example of this. *Citizen Kane* would be another, and I have in effect, five case studies in my book. I begin with Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, then do the films of W.C. Fields, then I do *The Godfather*, parts one and two. And then *Breaking Bad*, and I end largely with the *Walking Dead*. But in general, with apocalyptic narratives in modern television. I begin with *Huck Finn* because this is an American classic, everyone thinks of it as this rosy story. We picture Mickey Rooney or Elijah Wood playing Huck Finn. But *Huck Finn* is a very, very dark book. Murders occur in it; lynchings occur in it and a great number of con men are in it, especially this "duke" and this "king" who go around bilking people along the Mississippi. And what I realized in studying and trying to account for the dark side in what ought to be a very bright book, is that America professes to be the fresh start nation, the nation that gives people a fresh start, a new beginning in life. Just forget about anything that happened in the Old World, you're in America now. The slate is blank; you can become whatever you want to become. But, if America's the fresh-start nation, it's also going to be the

false-start nation, that you can't expect everybody to make it. In fact, what Twain examines is how much the good side of America blends over into the bad side. For example, identity is very fluid in America. It's one of the great things about America. We don't have a rigid class system. Anyone can become whoever he wants, but that means America is also the land of con men. It's where people can masquerade. *Huck Finn* as a novel is just filled with people masquerading, including Huck Finn himself, who masquerades as Tom Sawyer for much of the book and the reason he can is he's with Tom Sawyer's

We have a long tradition in popular culture in what are called Horatio Alger stories, nineteenth and twentieth-century success stories. America loves the success story; America loves happy endings. At the same time, though, Americans have been fascinated with what happens when that story goes wrong.

relatives who live several states away and they've never seen Tom Sawyer. And America is this incredibly mobile nation with a fresh start around every corner and that's great and in a way, that's the heart of American entrepreneurship. You can build yourself up from nothing. But the flip side of that is the con man and a lot of this book turns on the easy movement from the con man to the entrepreneur and perhaps back. And what's interesting there, from where I begin in the book is that although I've turned to the dark side, in some ways, you still see the bright side there.

For example, in *The Godfather*, it's the nightmare tale of American immigration. American immigration is at the heart of the American Dream; it's one of the greatest

things that America offers, that you can come to this new land and prosper. And what that means, though, is that sometimes immigrants have a hard time, they encounter prejudice, they're not given a chance and so, they swerve off into crime and that's certainly the story of Italian-Americans, also Irish-Americans, and Jews in terms of Prohibition and other areas of crime. They were denied legitimate outlets and access to legitimate business, and so they sought out some shady outlet in business. But that can be flipped to understand that these people actually were enterprising. Norman Podhoretz wrote a very interesting essay about *The Godfather* novel, I think it was specifically on crime and the American Dream. I don't know if I buy this argument entirely, but he said that by this point, the 1970s, capitalism was so despised in intellectual circles and in the media circles, that the only way you could get away with celebrating an entrepreneur in a book was by taking a gangster, and showing this criminal as a successful businessman. He saw *The Godfather* as the descendant of the old Horatio Alger stories. He thought people are actually fascinated by the virtues of Vito Corleone and in many ways, his virtues are the traditional American virtues. He's a family man, he's a hard worker, he's trying to improve his family, he takes chances.

In that sense, these criminals are entrepreneurs, and this is an issue that comes up with the Drug War in *Breaking Bad* as well. In fact, there is a sequence in *Breaking Bad* where Walter White, the hero, as I call him, is talking

with his brother-in-law, Hank, the DEA agent. Hank is brewing his own beer and Walter says to him, "you know, in 1930, you would have been doing something illegal." And they get into a long discussion about the morals of whether something's legal or illegal and whether it's just something that the government is determining. I like the fact, especially since the book focuses on *The Godfather* movies and *Breaking Bad*, that I'm able to focus on those issues. *The Godfather* chapter has an epigraph from Frank Sinatra and I can tell you that when I was in English graduate school, I never dreamed I'd write a book where a chapter would have an epigraph from Frank Sinatra and it's a wonderful indictment of Prohibition and everything that was wrong with it. So, again, these stories allow me to take up some very serious issues — libertarian issues — and I try to show how many of the problems that these works deal with are actually created by the federal government in the first place.

JD: You choose to write books for popular consumption, instead of writing academic journal articles like many professors.

PC: It's much easier to publish on popular culture, as I found out after I was approached to do my first popular-culture book, *Gilligan Unbound*. Steve Wrinn, who was then with Rowman and Littlefield, approached me with the idea. I basically never intended to get into the pop culture criticism business. I kind of did it first as a joke. I wrote a piece on *Gilligan's Island* and wrote something on *The Simpsons*. I'll never forget, the BBC was interviewing me for the 400th episode of *The Simpsons* and somehow, my background came up and this BBC interviewer says, "You've written a book on *Hamlet*. Why are you writing about *The Simpsons*?" And I said, "because when I wrote my book on *Hamlet*, you didn't even dream of interviewing me on the BBC, but the minute I write on *The Simpsons*, you interview me." He didn't like that answer, actually.

JD: Great answer.

PC: By the way, I have never taught pop culture. I have never taught a course on pop culture in my life. I lecture on it at colleges and universities, but sort of outside the normal academic framework. I don't believe in carrying coals to Newcastle — that phrase will mean nothing to



the current generation — but I don't believe in teaching a course on popular culture, to students who are thoroughly immersed in pop culture. I found when I wrote on it and lectured on it outside of regular classes, that students really could respond to it and I'd be struggling to find if they'd read even one Shakespeare play, but they could quote every episode of *The Simpsons* back at me. So, I found I was having productive discussions and they were about serious issues. You can talk about the decline of the family in American life from watching *The Simpsons*. You can talk about the role of the federal government when you look at the FBI or the IRS episodes of *The Simpsons*. So, I felt I actually had a kind of leverage that I could speak to students about interesting subjects and they would respond, and I thought that was good. So, I pursued it more than I would have otherwise.

JD: Give us your thoughts on the state of the humanities in higher education. We read about university administrations cutting humanities budgets, that nobody wants to major in English or history or philosophy anymore.

PC: Well, it's certainly true. I will not attempt to cite numbers because I don't have them accurately, but the enrollment in English departments is falling everywhere to the point where I am told that some major English departments now have majors in double digits.

JD: Wow.

PC: Yes. And triple digits were typical in my department — the UVA English major is still in triple digits — but the number is significantly lower than it was 10 years ago. And whole departments are disappearing around the country. Some of the languages, German departments, for example, are under pressure. Comparative literature departments are under pressure, and there's no question that it's happening. There are many reasons for it and people in the humanities will complain that it's a result of the increasingly mercenary nature of students, that they want to study in undergraduate business schools or study economically useful subjects like economics or political science. But my answer to that is the problem is internal, that humanities departments wouldn't be

losing as many students if they still had something high minded to offer students. There's a reason why students might gravitate toward practical subjects. After all, most colleges and universities are now advertising themselves on the idea that you will boost your income by going to college and the more they choose to raise their tuition, the more it seems imperative to students to get some payback for their money. But what the liberal arts — especially the humanities — used to have to offer is great books, great paintings, great music and you could make a deal with students. Yeah, this stuff's tough. It's not easy to understand a J.S. Bach fugue, and it's not easy to read

It's not easy to understand a
J.S. Bach fugue, or to read
Joyce's *Ulysses*, or to comprehend
Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel.
But at the end of the effort,
you will be a better human
being and you will feel it; you
will feel uplifted from having
encountered this and you
will see your life change.

Joyce's *Ulysses* and it's not easy to comprehend Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel. But at the end of the effort, you will be a better human being and you will feel it; you will feel uplifted from having encountered this and you will see your life change. I mean, as recently as last week, I got an email from somebody who had been listening to my Shakespeare lectures online and said, "The lectures have changed my life." And that's what you want to hear as a teacher. But, it's very difficult now that the humanities have become a species of what is known as grievance studies in the world. Now, you turn to literature, not because it's uplifting, not because it's in any meaningful sense "great," but you regard literature as the expression of identity. Most of the time, it's the expression of a bad identity. Most courses will concern themselves with whether a given author is sexist or racist or classist. The

idea is to treat the artist negatively, as politically incorrect, and that gets old very quickly.

Part of the benefit of reading these works is that they take us to a very different time and place. I remember from the start, reading books because they were about a different world. I wanted to learn about Aeschylus, and I wanted to learn about Homer. I did not want to read books about a middle-class Jewish neighborhood in Brooklyn. And people were writing that.

The favorite and most complimentary adjective my students have of a book is, “it’s relatable.” And that’s what they’ve been taught, to relate the book to – quite frankly – the little circumscribed narrow world that they grew up in. By contrast, I’ve always looked to literature to be eye opening, to take you some place you’ve never been before.

People would say to me, “you’ve never read a novel by Philip Roth?” And I’d say “no, I lived that, I don’t need to read a novel about it.” And it’s kind of shocking that I’ve never read a book by Philip Roth. But you know, I’ve read novels by Franz Kafka and by Dickens and by Dostoyevsky, and it’s a whole different world and I find that more interesting. And that’s what we’ve lost the sense of. I noticed the favorite and most complimentary adjective my students have of a book is, “it’s relatable.” And that’s what they’ve been taught, to relate the book to — quite frankly — the little circumscribed narrow world that they grew up in. By contrast, I’ve always looked to literature to be eye opening, to take you some place you’ve never been before.

So, it’s one thing to complain that money making is exerting its magical charm on students. That’s a natural impulse, so you need something to counteract it. But now, if you

really are running down most of the literature of the past and showing its limitations, well why bother to read it? And in fact, with many of my colleagues and throughout my profession, literature is seen now as a means to social justice. That’s how we have to use literature. We have to read literature to know how prejudiced and outmoded the world is and how we have to move beyond it. But if social justice is the goal of reading literature, why not just take courses in social justice? Why not take courses in the social sciences, if the goal of literature is the economic improvement of the masses. Go take

a couple of economics courses and I think that’s what’s happening. In effect, literature departments have lost their comparative advantage. What they did best and what they could offer to people is to show these masterpieces in the history of human culture. These are the peaks of human achievement; these are what we look up to. And again, this is Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, this is Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel. These are jaw-dropping things in the world, and it used to be that college would introduce people to that. Now, it doesn’t anymore and that’s why I think the students are voting with their feet. I think the mistake my colleagues have made is, they thought they had a captive audience, that we’ve

been given the Western heritage and people want access to it and students will always come to our courses because we’re English professors or we teach German literature, or whatever.

But if you don’t teach that heritage, you lose the one thing that was getting students in the seats. I don’t think that’s actually sunk in to my colleagues and we seem to have fallen off a cliff in the past two years. I asked two classes this year if they’d heard of T.S. Eliot. These are English majors and not a single person in the class had heard of T.S. Eliot. Now, I’ve always thought T.S. Eliot was a tad overrated, but I won’t get into that. Still, he’s certainly one of the most important poets of the twentieth century, and to think of an English major who’s never even heard the name T.S. Eliot! You know, about three years ago, they had never heard of Matthew Arnold. Again, I can kind of understand that. He’s from the 1800s, but

it's really amazing, I had a class where no one had heard of Beethoven and it was so funny because I was teaching a play by Friedrich von Schiller and I understood none of them were going to have heard of Friedrich von Schiller. I said, you know, you've never heard of him, but of course, you know his poetry. And they stared at me and I say, "Freude, schöner Götterfunken, Tochter aus Elysium," quoting the "Ode to Joy" at the end of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and I knew they weren't going to understand the German, but my joke was going to be, you know: "That's Beethoven's Ninth Symphony." And they stared at me. They'd never heard of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and I said, you have heard of Beethoven, haven't you? And they said "No, who's Beethoven?" And if it weren't for Chuck Berry's, *Roll Over Beethoven*, they probably wouldn't have a prayer of figuring it out. I mean, I was stunned and in fact, I'm really annoying my students now because whenever I bring up a new subject, I feel I have to ask them, "Have you heard of X?" and they are thinking, "we have good educations, we're college students." But if you haven't heard of Beethoven and you haven't heard of T.S. Eliot it's really amazing. You can't teach if you don't have reference points. I used to build my whole introductory course on comparative literature around T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. I assumed they all know this poem and they love it, and it's this great poem. I basically said, "take this course and you can understand this poem." It quotes from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and it quotes from Dante, it quotes from Richard Wagner. To understand this poem, you've got to go back to the past and understand all the things Eliot understood. Well, now they don't even know who Eliot is. I've lost my little trick to get them interested in the course.

So, I am really seeing even greater decline in what my colleague E.D. Hirsch calls cultural literacy in students and it looks to be getting only worse. Because that's the other thing, that we're now in a kind of cycle of forgetting. For a while, I could get great discussions going on *Breaking Bad*. As recently as three years ago, my class on tragedy was faltering and I said, well, if you don't understand what a tragic hero is, let's talk about Walter White and we had the best class all semester, but now they don't catch *Breaking Bad* references.

JD: It's been a few years since that show ended.

PC: Yes, it's ancient history, but they live so much in the present and I don't want to sound like an old fogey. Let me try to sound a bit like a young fogey. In many ways, the students are impressive. They are computer literate in a way I am not and that is impressive. That's a talent, it's a skill, it gives them a lot of access to information and even at times knowledge and I don't want to underestimate that. I often look at a website and I don't know which button to click and the student says, "Well of course, you click the one on the lower left hand in the corner that's blinking" or something and I don't want to be like some ancient medieval colleague who said to students, "I know they've got this thing called print now, but you learn to copy that manuscript by hand, it's the only way to preserve a text. This print thing, it's just a passing fad" and I'm sure if I'd lived in Gutenberg's time, I would have said something like that to my students, so I try to be careful to avoid that. But still, you can't help but notice these blank spaces in their minds and they are kind of unpredictable. You know, you can still refer to Stalin and Hitler, for example. For some reason, they still know who they were, and that they were not nice people, but other moments in history have really blurred for them. It's funny, they get things out of order in history. Here's an example: there is a recording of Alfred Lord Tennyson reading *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. It was one of the first recordings ever made of a poet reading and I was talking to a student about this and he said, "When did Tennyson live, around 1950?" And I kind of looked at him and I realized, he thought sound recording dates from 1950, not from Edison's phonograph of the 1870s. So, the fact we have his recorded voice meant, to this student, that Tennyson must have been born after 1950. And again, they know at some point there was a poet named Tennyson (although some of them don't even know that). They know at some point, sound recording was invented, but which century these two things happened in, and in what order, escapes them. And this was one of my best students! And again, it's not their fault, they're getting badly educated, so I try to be gentle with them and conceal my shock. The students are good-hearted — they really want to learn, but they're just not being taught properly.

JD: Well that's why the Mises Institute exists. Thank you, professor. ■■■

THE FAILURE OF GLOBAL LIBERAL HEGEMONY

DAVID GORDON
REVIEWS

The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy
Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy
Stephen M. Walt
Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018
xii + 384 pages

THE HELL OF GOOD INTENTIONS



AMERICA'S FOREIGN
POLICY ELITE
AND THE DECLINE
OF U.S. PRIMACY

STEPHEN M. WALT

Stephen Walt has put himself in a difficult position. He is a Professor of International Affairs at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard and the author of studies, most notably *The Origins of Alliances*, which have won him influence in what he calls the “foreign policy establishment.” He says, “I have been part of that community for much of my professional life.” At the same time, he acknowledges, “I am surely something of an outlier within that world.”

That is decidedly an understatement, and this leads to Walt’s difficult position. Despite his impeccable credentials as a foreign policy “insider,” much of *The Hell of Good Intentions* consists of a fierce assault on most of his fellow members of the establishment. “To put it in the bluntest terms, instead of being a disciplined body of professionals constrained by a well-informed public and forced by necessity to set priorities and hold themselves accountable, today’s foreign policy elite is a dysfunctional caste of privileged insiders who are frequently disdainful of alternative perspectives and insulated both professionally and personally from the consequences of the policies they promote. It was impolitic for the deputy national security advisor Ben Rhodes to dismiss this community as ‘the Blob,’ but the label nonetheless contains important elements of truth.”

According to Walt, the views of the Blob have led America to disaster. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the United States stood supreme in the world. “When the

Cold War ended, the United States found itself in a position of global primacy unseen since the Roman Empire. It had the world's largest and most advanced economy. ... The United States was also the only country in the world with a global military presence. ... Moreover, the United States was on good terms with all the other major powers ... relations with Russia were surprisingly cordial as the unipolar era began, as Moscow wanted Western help to transition to a market economy and was eager to forge cooperative security arrangements as well."

Given this favorable position, the rational course of action was clear. America should have withdrawn from its global commitments. No threat faced us: why, then, did we need to police the world? Nevertheless, American commitments were maintained and extended. Walt holds that this was not done to protect America but rather, to a large extent, for reasons of ideology: "Most important, U.S. leaders did not seek primacy in order to protect the American homeland from invasion or attack. Rather, they sought it in order to promote a liberal order abroad. Bill Clinton and Barack Obama used military force more cautiously and discretely than George W. Bush did, but all three post-Cold War presidents saw U.S. military

power as an invaluable tool for advancing an ambitious global agenda."

The pursuit of liberal hegemony rests on faulty theory and has led to bad results. The supporters of liberal hegemony thought that a liberal world order was self-evidently desirable and that America had the power to impose it on nations that dared to resist: "If other states balked, U.S. policymakers were convinced that the United States had the tools to force them to comply. It could impose economic sanctions, give aid to a hostile regime's foreign or domestic opponents, undermine rivals through covert action, and use military force to compel them to capitulate. If necessary, the United States could invade and depose hostile regimes at little cost or risk to itself. Once these obstreperous tyrants were gone, the United States and the rest of the liberal international community could step in and help liberated and grateful populations create new and legitimate democracies, thereby expanding the liberal, pro-American order even more."

This ambitious program rests on flawed foundations. Walt is especially effective in his criticism of one of these foundations, "democratic peace theory." Concerning this dubious doctrine, he says: "Although it is true that liberal democracies have fought few wars with each other,



there is still no satisfactory explanation of why this is the case ... history also warns that newly democratized states are especially prone to internal and external conflicts. ... Democratic peace theory also says little about how liberal states should deal with authoritarian regimes, except to suggest that overthrowing them is the path to perpetual peace ... it is a potent recipe for trouble between liberal and non-liberal countries.”

Liberal hegemony failed in large part because it ignored basic “truths” about how nations act, true it has been a principal aim of the “structural realist” school of international relations, of which Walt and his colleague John Mearsheimer are leading members, to emphasize.

Liberal hegemony failed in large part because it ignored basic “truths” about how nations act, true it has been a principal aim of the “structural realist” school of international relations, of which Walt and his colleague John Mearsheimer are leading members, to emphasize. “Imbalances of power make other states nervous, especially when the strongest state uses its power with little regard for others’ interests. It was entirely predictable that the so-called rogue states would look for ways to keep American power in check, for example because the United States had made spreading democracy a centerpiece of its grand strategy and taken dead aim at a number of these countries. ... America’s dominant position also alarmed some of America’s closest allies, including some foreign democracies. ... Their concerns were well-founded — not because the

United States deliberately used its power to harm friendly countries like France, but because America’s vast capabilities made it easy to hurt them by accident. The invasion of Iraq is a perfect illustration: it eventually led to the emergence of ISIS, whose online recruiting and brutal conduct inspired terrorist attacks in a number of



European countries and contributed to the refugee crisis that engulfed Europe in 2015.”

Despite the manifest failure of the liberal hegemony program, its advocates have retained their influence. They are rarely called to account for their mistakes. Walt writes with justifiable bitterness about one group among these advocates, the neoconservatives. “When it comes to U.S. foreign policy, the unchallenged world record for ‘second chances’ and ‘failing upward’ are America’s neoconservatives. Beginning in the mid-1980s, this influential network of hard-line pundits, journalists, think tank analysts, and government officials developed, purveyed and promoted an expansive vision of American power as a positive force in world affairs. They conceived and sold the idea of invading Iraq and toppling Saddam Hussein and insisted that this bold move would enable the United States to transform much of the Middle East into a sea of pro-American democracies. ... None of their rosy visions

have come to pass, and if holding people to account were a guiding principle inside the foreign policy community, these individuals would now be marginal figures.” They in fact remain influential, and Elliot Abrams, one of the neo-conservatives Walt discusses, has recently been appointed United States Special Representative to Venezuela.

Walt’s case against liberal hegemony is convincing, but what does he propose to put in its place? True to his structural realism, he calls for “offshore balancing.” Under this policy, the United States would abandon its futile attempt to spread liberal democracy throughout the world. Instead, America would concentrate on selected areas deemed to be vital national interests. “Offshore balancers believe that only a few areas of the globe are of vital importance to U.S. security or prosperity and thus worth sending Americans to fight and die for. The first vital region is the Western hemisphere itself, where America’s dominant position ensures that no neighbor

can pose a serious threat to the U.S. homeland. ... But unlike isolationists, offshore balancers believe that three distant regions also matter to the United States: Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf.”

In these regions, the aim of the United States would be to prevent the emergence of a “local hegemon.” If one seemed on the horizon, America should encourage states in the region to “balance against” the rising power. America would remain “offshore” as long as possible, although military intervention would by no means be excluded if the regional states failed in their efforts to balance.

Walt is right that his strategy would “prolong America’s position of primacy” for much less cost than the policy of liberal hegemony, but why is it in our interest to maintain American supremacy at all? Walt has not fully broken from the globalist assumptions he attacks so well throughout *The Hell of Good Intentions*. We should instead adopt the non-interventionist policy so ably championed by Ron Paul: only the defense of the United States itself is a “vital national interest.” Walt’s failure to follow the logic of his own argument against hegemony to a non-interventionist conclusion explains why he is an “outlier” in the foreign policy establishment rather than a complete opponent of that group.



David Gordon is Senior Fellow at the Mises Institute, and editor of *The Mises Review*.

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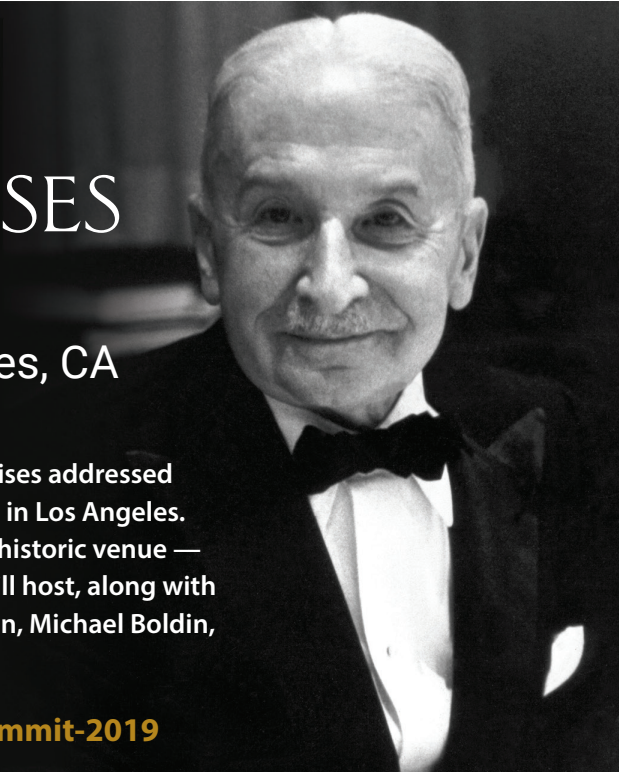


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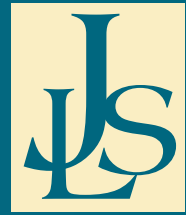
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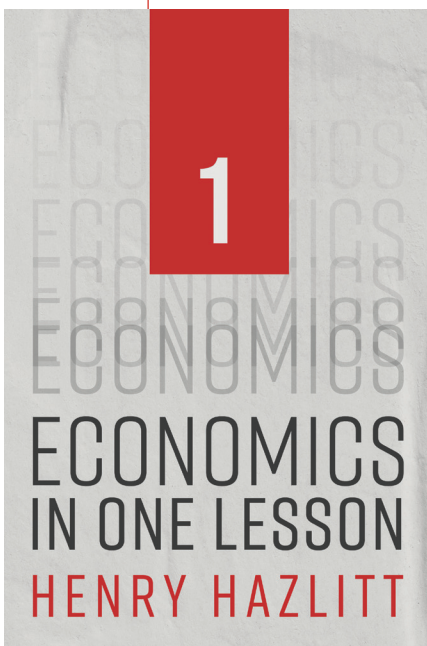


After a hiatus of about 10 years, the Mises Institute is resuming publication of the *Journal of Libertarian Studies*, with volume 23 scheduled to appear before the end of the year. This peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary journal will complement the economics-focused *Quarterly Journal of Austrian Economics*. **David Gordon** will serve as editor and **Timothy Terrell** as associate editor.

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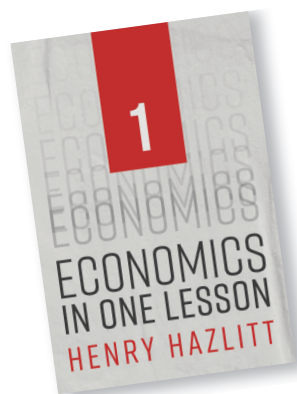
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