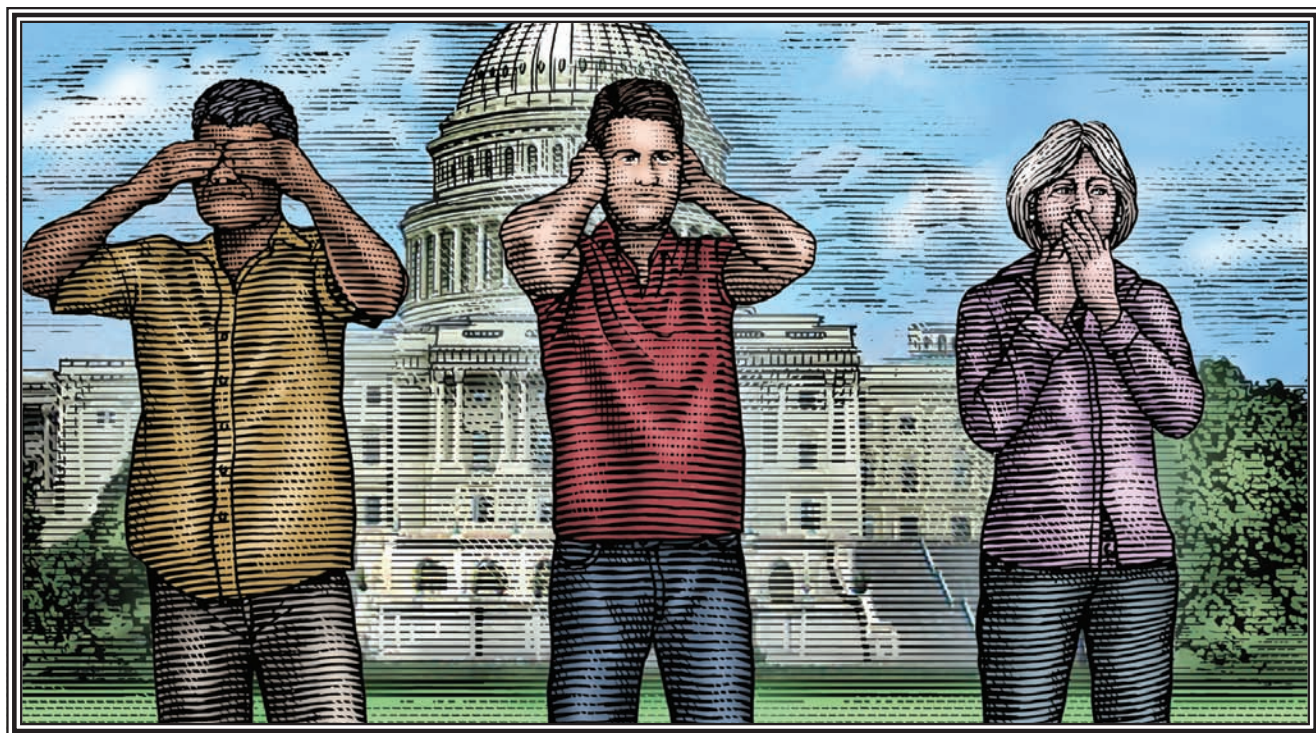


RAFIL KROLL-ZAIDI: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE END OF TIME

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## IGNORANCE OF THINGS PAST

Who Wins and Who Loses When We Forget American History  
*By Lewis H. Lapham*

## THE LAST TOWER

The Decline and Fall of Public Housing  
*By Ben Austen*

## OUR RACCOON YEAR

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# IGNORANCE OF THINGS PAST

Who wins and who loses when we forget American history

By Lewis H. Lapham

*What then is, generally speaking, the truth of history? A fable agreed upon.*

—Napoleon

The thought comes to mind when I hear one of the season's political candidates offer to "take America back." Back where? From whom? What means of conveyance? Aboard the *Mayflower*, or at the point of a gun? If back home on the range, do the deer and the antelope still play with the Teton Sioux? If from the grasp of venal politicians and vampire capitalists, does Ralph Waldo Emerson go to Washington and Commodore Vanderbilt prison?

The questions speak to the fanciful deployments of history in the collective American consciousness, and when raised by the restorers of the country's greatness, they tend to invite further discussion about the drifting downstream from the Federalist Papers to Fox News. How does it come to pass that the White House stands exposed to the tinhorn hypocrisies of Ricks Perry and Santorum, or that Rush Lim-

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baugh ascends to the throne of philosopher king?

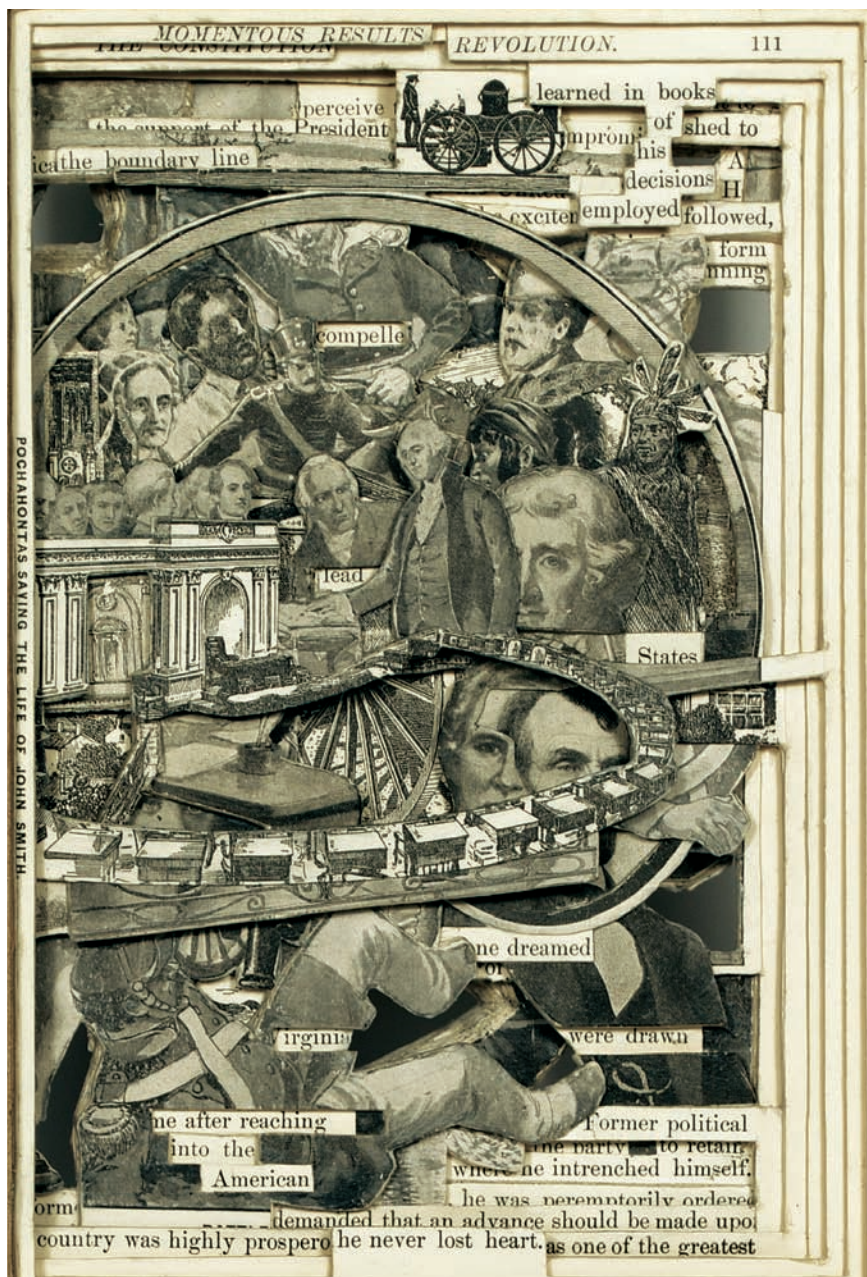
For the past thirty years the mourners at the bier of the lost American enlightenment have been assigning the fault to television and the nation's schools. Winter and summer, in sunshine or in rain, they assemble in a university auditorium or conference

center, and before the end of the first morning's dialogue at least two of the presentations have shown various groupings of an increasingly illiterate populace to be as poorly informed about American history as they are about the history of ancient Egypt or modern Uzbekistan: 76 percent of college graduates unfamiliar with the Bill of Rights, 73 percent of respondents unable to identify America's antagonist during the four decades of the Cold War.

The afternoon sessions dwell on the evils likely to befall a nation deprived of its memory; the evening's keynote speaker observes that the tabloid-induced states of amnesia cannot sustain the hope of individual liberty or support the practice of democratic self-government. At breakfast the next day, all present deplore the ruin of what was once an educated citizenry but consider the loss somehow consistent with the American temperament—impatient, go-ahead, fast-

forwarding people inclined to view the past as irrelevant, sharing Henry Ford's judgment that "history is more or less bunk." A crying shame, of course, but not one that can be helped as long as the football coach at Florida State receives an income greater than that of the university's entire classics faculty.





dead. It's not even past." For a longer answer I rely on a lesson learned at Cambridge University in the autumn of 1956, one for which over the past fifty-six years I've found various occasions to offer as a proof of Faulkner's theorem. I don't now remember the name of the tutor assigned by Magdalene College to conduct the welcoming interview, but I remember the setting—damp day, tea with crumpet, coal fire in an ancient grate, preliminary remarks in favor of Admiral Lord Nelson and Samuel Pepys.

At Yale College I'd been encouraged to attempt the career of an historian, flattered by my professors to think that I had a firm hold of what was then a trendsetting course of study admitted to the curriculum under the heading of intellectual history. Mention the name of a dead poet or an unhorsed king, and I could be counted upon to attach the wiring to the appropriate zeitgeist, connect the poet to a revolution, the king to a metaphor.

My tutor was delighted to learn that wonders never ceased. Yes, well, he said, I see, great news, of course, but perhaps you could spare a few moments for the twelfth century? Over the distance of maybe ten minutes I managed to juggle the bookish equivalents of Indian clubs, drawing the parallel between the Ptolemaic universe and the arrangement of Amsterdam's canals.

When I'd run through my list of bold-faced significance the tutor poured us both a second cup of tea, and for the next quarter of an hour, with an air of utmost courtesy, offering plum cake, or perhaps a glass of sherry, he asked questions about aspects of the twelfth century that possibly I had overlooked. The coins in circulation on the Upper and Lower Rhine? Durations of travel—by land from Paris to Milan, by sea from Marseille to Dover? As between the two cities of Rome and Baghdad, which boasted the larger concentrations of wealth and religious superstition? In Byzantium, the prices bid and asked for Russian fur and Christian slaves?

My failure to hazard even so much as a Hail Mary guess moved the don to a murmur of mild regret, as if he'd been hoping to see at least one of the Indian clubs defy the law of gravity. Yes, well, he said, you Americans have this wonderful talent for grand simplification

I don't question the statistics, but I find them hard to square with the circumstantial evidence. State governments swarm with officials devoted to the preservation of historical monuments, the movie and television screens with the projection of historical documentary and romance, the best-seller lists with biographies of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Teddy Roosevelt, the Pennsylvania countryside with the appearance every summer of as many as 13,000 volunteers dressed in Civil War military uniform to revive the Battle of Gettysburg.

So vivid in the popular imagination is the iconography of the American past that it's no surprise when in the course

of reviewing the day's news somebody at the hotel bar or the kitchen table wonders what John Adams would have thought about the pornographic-film industry, or how John Wayne might have handled the Mexicans crossing the Rio Grande. It isn't that Americans view the past as irrelevant; it's that they regard it as the stuff that dreams are made of, straw spun into gold, camera-ready for the preferred and more profitable markets in prime-time myth.

Why then argue for uses of history other than the ones that sponsor the election campaigns, blow the bubbles in Wall Street, underwrite the nation's wars? The short answer is William Faulkner's, "The past is never

that hasn't been granted to the poor relations here in England. Before reaching the noble paradigm, you see, we like to have in hand a passing acquaintance with at least some of the facts. A tedious business, he said, and very slow, more like our game of cricket than your game of baseball.\*

A year at Cambridge put an end to any thought of my becoming a professor of history—I was reluctant to learn medieval German, my parents reluctant to finance the time required to learn it—but it allowed me to appreciate the truth of Thomas Jefferson's observation that "a morsel of genuine history is a thing so rare as to be always valuable." Where else does one live if not in a house of straw made from the reshaping of a once-upon-a-time? What else is it possible to change if not the past? The future is nonexistent, the present come and gone too quickly to establish a mailing address.

**H**istory is work in progress, a constant writing and rewriting as opposed to museum-quality sculpture in milk-white marble. To read three histories of the British Empire—one of them published in 1850, the others in 1900 and 1950—is to discover three different British Empires on which the sun eventually sets. The must-see tourist attractions remain intact—Napoleon still there on his horse at Waterloo, Queen Victoria enthroned in Buckingham Palace, the subcontinent firmly fixed to its moorings in the Indian Ocean—but as to the light in which Napoleon, the queen, or India is to be seen, accounts differ.

Each age revises its conception of the past to fit the context of its present, and by and large the historian will find the facts that prove the truths of his inter-

pretation. History is not what happened 200 or 2,000 years ago; it is a story about what happened 200 or 2,000 years ago. The stories change, as do the sight lines available to the tellers of the tales. Montaigne in one of his essays provides, as is his custom, an apt quotation:

See how Plato is moved and tossed about. Every man, glorying in applying him to himself, sets him on the side he wants. They trot him out and insert him into all the new opinions that the world accepts.

Not being a scholar affiliated with a tenure track, I don't much care whether the *mise en scène* is Athens in the fourth century B.C., Paris in the 1740s, or Moscow in the winter of 1905. I look for an understanding of the human predicament, to discover or re-discover how it is with man, who he is and how it is between him and other men. To consult the record in books both ancient and modern is to come across every vice, virtue, motive, behavior, obsession, consequence, joy, and sorrow to be met with on the roads across the frontiers of the millennia. What survives the wreck of empires and the sack of cities is the sound of a human voice confronting the fact of its own mortality. The historian Sarah Bakewell, in *How to Live*, her recent book on Montaigne's life and thought, compounds the apt quotation with a corollary observation that she borrows from Virginia Woolf, "... any live mind is of the very same stuff as Plato's & Euripides.... It is this common mind that binds the whole world together; & all the world is mind."

Valued as both natural resource and applied technology, the reading of history makes possible the revolt against what G. K. Chesterton once called the "small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about." This observation is in line with George Orwell's dictum "Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past." Orwell was talking about the uses of history as propaganda bent to the service of the state. The better assignment of the dictum is to the purposes of the individual. Who is the "who" if not one's self, and how else does one find that self if not by rummaging around in the attic of history, which makes

room at the inn for both the freedom and the furnishing of one's own mind? Cicero made the point fifty years before the birth of Christ: "Not to know what happened before one was born is always to be a child."

It is the ignorance of the past that invites the despairing of the present, which in turn leads to the marketing of dead-end politics with ad campaigns for a lost golden age. As often as not the nostalgic sales pitch (city upon a hill, amber waves of grain, majestic purple mountains) is the contrivance of a reactionary status quo floating the speculation on a redeeming tomorrow with subprime borrowings from an imaginary yesterday.

Thus Mitt Romney in 2010 at the Values Voter Summit: "We will preserve America's character as the land of liberty ... we admire the entrepreneur, the inventor, the innovator. We will insist on greatness from every one of our citizens." Or President Barack Obama delivering the State of the Union address this January: "We can restore an economy where everyone gets a fair shot, and everyone does their fair share, and everyone plays by the same set of rules. What's at stake aren't Democratic values or Republican values, but American values. And we have to reclaim them."

The campaign rhetoric plays to the popular suspicion that somehow something has gone badly wrong with the American Dream. The expressions of betrayal show up on both the disaffected right and the disillusioned left, in the Tea Party proclamations and the movement to occupy Wall Street, all present taking note of America's wandering eastward out of Eden. The same disheartening message streams through the firmament of the blogosphere, the motion sustained by the public-opinion polls, 69 percent of the respondents last fall believing that the country is in decline. Book publishers flood the market with melancholy tracts likening the decline of the American republic to the fall of imperial Rome. The *New York Times* reports that the world's newly emerging democracies no longer fit their constitutions to the eighteenth-century American model, choosing instead to take their cues from the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms or the European Convention on Human Rights. *Foreign Affairs* asks on its cover

\*Many years later at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York, I saw Henry Kissinger reprise my Cambridge performance with a set of A-list catchphrases that his audience of corporate hierarchs chose to regard as the wisdom of Prince Klemens von Metternich temporarily on loan from the Congress of Vienna. Kissinger was more adroit, but the technique was familiar, as was the grotesque simplification—the nuclear option trumping the China card, lines in the Middle Eastern sand connecting the Temple of Solomon to the Boeing Airplane Company, America under no circumstances to be caught holding Chamberlain's umbrella.



IS AMERICA OVER? and follows up the question with an essay concluding that yes, Virginia, probably it is, done to death by “inequality” that “hardens society into a class system, imprisoning people in the circumstances of their birth.” Goodbye to Huckleberry Finn, no more upward mobility for Horatio Alger’s Ragged Dick, both God and Mammon outsourced to Bangalore.

As with the snapshots sent home to Mom and Dad from a winter vacation in Hawaii, the postcards from an illusory American past—the innocent Arcadia over the rainbow of the mid-nineteenth-century Western frontier, the classless society that is the root of fair-minded free enterprise and all things innovative and entrepreneurial—don’t mention any unpleasantness or inconvenience. The pioneers going west in the 1840s carried with them the promise of a land of milk and honey into what proved to be a desert; the 2,000-mile length of the Oregon Trail was littered with abandoned wagons and newly furnished graves. The juvenile delinquents at play in the sandbox towns of Deadwood and Nacogdoches didn’t challenge one another to heroic duels in the sun; best business practice was to shoot the scoundrel in the back, at long range and with a rifle. Fortunes were to be found in four fields of endeavor (cattle, mining, timber, land), all of them dependent on government subsidy. The romance of the West so fondly embraced by President Ronald Reagan—Stetson hat silhouetted against the studio-backdrop sky of the new morning in America—was the invention of the literary East, the early scripts drafted by nineteenth-century Ivy League swells (Francis Parkman, Owen Wister, Teddy Roosevelt, Frederic Remington), the subsequent production values supplied by immigrant film merchants arriving in Hollywood in the 1910s from Warsaw and Minsk.

**T**he postcard likely to brighten the hopes of this year’s presidential election is the Norman Rockwell picturing of the classless society, and for the next six months at every Democratic or Republican fund-raiser charging \$5,000 a plate for the poached salmon, the speakers on the dais can be counted upon to shed tears for the dearly departed egalitarian state of

grace. The message is nonpartisan, fit for delivery in a Beverly Hills ballroom or an Oklahoma hospitality tent. Each party holds the other responsible for stirring up class warfare between the 99 percent and the 1 percent.

The only thing worth noting in either the ballroom or the tent is the absence of a quorum closely associated with (seriously angry about, other than rhetorically interested in) the fact of being poor. Were the invited bank balances to be somehow so informed, they also might be permitted to remember that America has been relying on the convenience of a class system since the good old days in Puritan Massachusetts. But even if they know of such a thing, maybe having heard tell of it in a novel by Edith Wharton or F. Scott Fitzgerald, one doesn’t speak of it in polite company. The topic is in bad taste.

Possibly because I was born into what in America fits the description of a privileged class, I’m hard put to pretend that it doesn’t exist. So would have been America’s Founding Fathers, almost all of them men of property setting up a government hospitable to the acquisition of more property. Unlike the Magna Carta, the Constitution doesn’t contemplate the sharing of the commons inherent in a bountiful wilderness; it provides the means of making manifest an unequal division of the spoils. Thomas Jefferson didn’t confuse the theory—“All men are created equal”—with the practice—“Money, not morality, is the principle of commercial nations.”

Which is to say, a government of the rich, by the rich, and for the rich—Obama beholden to Goldman Sachs and JPMorgan Chase, Romney risen from the black lagoon of Bain Capital. The news is maybe unwelcome, but it doesn’t come as a surprise. Where in the record books does one look for a government of the poor, by the poor, and for the poor? How else does a society know or govern itself if not with guidelines shaped by some form of class distinction? In the United States the table of organization is for sale, made with money instead of an aristocratic birthright, the favor of a king, or the grace of God. Students at Yale in the eighteenth century were ranked in the order of their social prominence; so

were the dance cards at the balls in colonial Philadelphia, the young ladies in the room swept up into the music in a sequence dictated by their pecuniary decency. Of the first ten presidents, eight were blessed with holdings (rents, capital, slaves) valued in today’s currency at more than \$20 million. Add to their company the two Presidents Roosevelt, Herbert Hoover, John F. Kennedy, Bush *père et fils*, and the White House during the better part of its term in office has served as a second home for money.

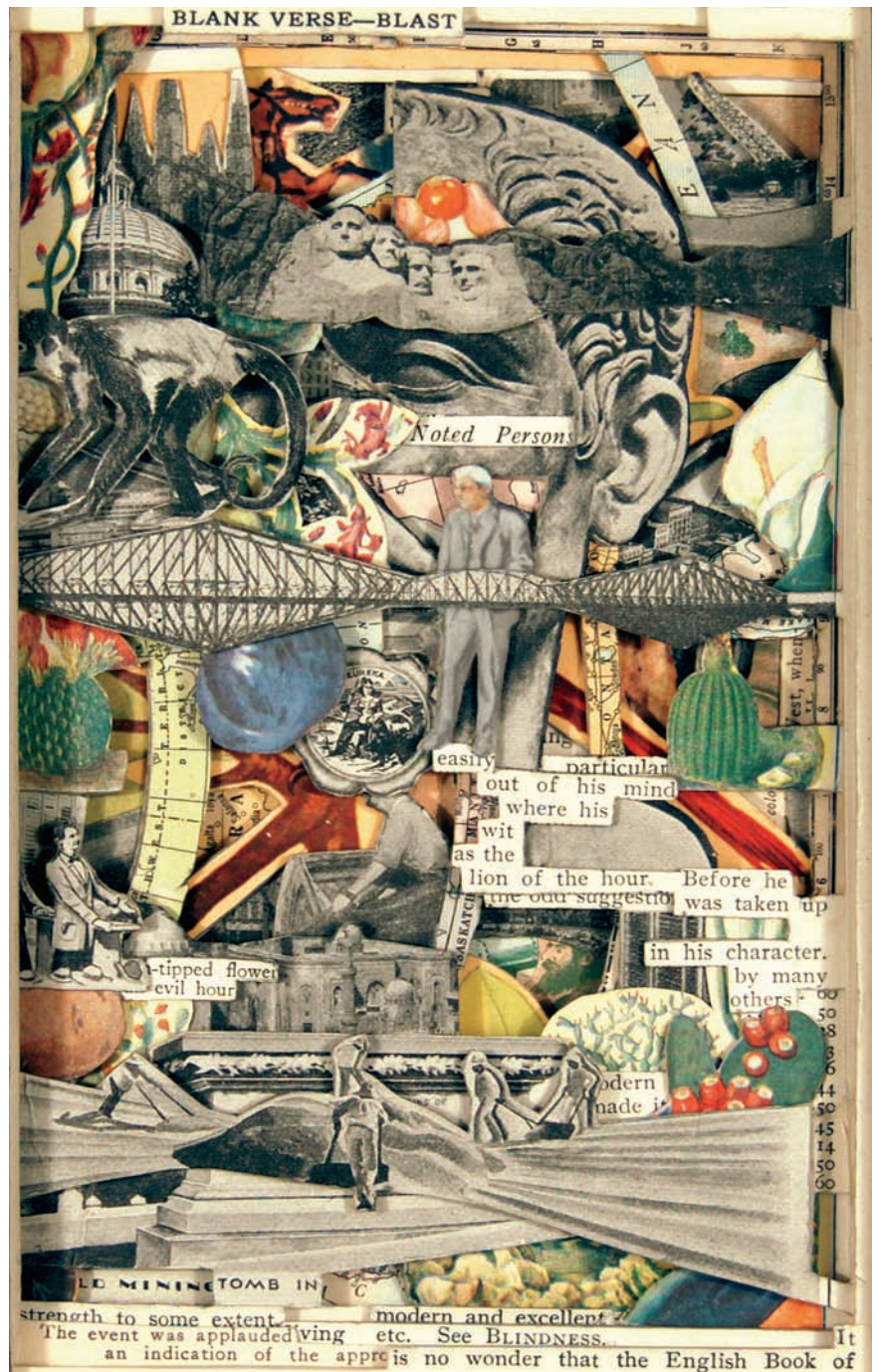
At no point in its history has the country not been nailed to a cross of gold. Mark Hanna, the Ohio coal merchant managing William McKinley’s presidential campaign against William Jennings Bryan in 1896, phrased the proposition in a form that our own cable-channel commentariat still plays as late-breaking news: “There are two things that are important in politics. The first is money, and I can’t remember what the second one is.” The Supreme Court in 2010 sustained the judgment with the *Citizens United* ruling that deregulated the market in political office and thus ratified the opinion of John Jay, appointed chief justice in 1789, that “those who own the country ought to govern it.”

Nor at any point in its history has America declared a lasting peace between the haves and the have-nots. Temporary cessations of hostilities, but no permanent closing of the moral and social gap between debtor and creditor. Dipped at birth in the font of boom and bust, the United States over the past 225 years has suffered the embarrassment of multiple bank panics and collapses into economic recession. The worst of the consequences invariably accrue to the accounts defaulting on the loans of bourgeois respectability, the would-be upwardly mobile poor taking the fall for their betters.

The notion of a classless society derives its credibility from the relatively few periods in the life of the nation during which circumstances allowed for social readjustment and experiment—in the 1830s, ’40s, and ’50s, again in the 1950s and ’60s—but for the most part the record will show the game securely rigged in favor of the rich, no matter how selfish or stupid, at

A democratic society puts a premium on equality; a capitalist economy does not. Inequality—buy cheap, sell dear—is for capitalism the name of the game. Within the political arenas of the United States the two approaches to one's fellow men (as valuable citizen or valued customer) have been more or less violently at odds since they provided Jefferson and Hamilton with their argument about the formation of a national bank. During the last thirty years of the nineteenth century and the first thirty years of the twentieth, class conflict presented the newspaper mills with their best and brightest headlines—railroad company thugs quelling labor unrest in the industrial East, the Ku Klux Klan lynching black men in the rural South, the U.S. Army exterminating the Indians on the Western plains, the Populist and Progressive movements, the Spanish-American War, the Bureau of Investigation rounding up Communists (also liberals, anarchists, aliens) in 1919–20, the crash of 1929.

John M. Barry's recent biography, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*, offers an impressive proof of the hypothesis. Certainly the earliest, conceivably the greatest, of



America's forefathers, Williams, a Puritan dissenter threatened with imprisonment or death in Caroline England, removed to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1631. Becoming known for his too eloquent improvisations on the theme of conscience and his unorthodox pleadings from scripture, he soon fell afoul of the authorities in Governor John Winthrop's city upon a hill. The settlement was intended to embody the glory and the will of God, and any giving way to unauthorized expres-

sions of feeling or thought resulted in punishment that was both cruel and prompt—the slicing off of the perp's ears, adulterers of both sexes chastised with whips.

Williams refused to conform, believing that man's dealings with God were not subject to government regulation, and in 1636, deemed to have committed both the spiritual sin of pride and a mundane act of rebellion, he was banished to a British prison. Williams dodged the ship sent to carry out the sentence, and at the age of thirty-three,



forced to abandon his home, wife, and two children, he departed on foot from Salem in January, overwintering in the company of bands of Indians with whom he spoke in their own language—the only Englishman in North America at the time capable of doing so. Making his way south to what is now the state of Rhode Island, Williams established the first government anywhere in the world that granted its citizens the freedom of religious thought. Fluent in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek as well as Narragansett, friend to Oliver Cromwell and John Milton, Williams over the course of a long and uneasy life (1603–1683) abjured the comfort of moral certainty, never believed himself safe in the hand of Providence: “I desire not to sleep in securitie and dreame of a Nest wch no hand can reach.” From the book and pamphlets that he published in the 1640s while in London petitioning Parliament for Rhode Island’s charter, John Locke borrowed much of the thinking subsequently transferred by Madison and Jefferson into the argument for the American separation of church and state.

Williams’s courage of mind ensured his persecution by the agents of the Crown in England as well as by the Puritan inspectors of souls in Massachusetts, and to read the story of his life is to be reminded that what he called “Soule Libertie” doesn’t fall, like pennies or a gentle rain, from Heaven. To know something of Williams other than the statue on the second floor of the U.S. Senate allows room for argument not only with the sales promotions for a rose-colored past but also with the dire prophecies of a future draped in funeral black. The Puritan divines preaching to the seventeenth-century faithful in the New England wilderness never failed to see a world in ruins, so terrible the constant sight of Satan that they staged the delivery of their sermons with a fretful rubbing of tears from their eyes.

So also our own secular news media blowing the trumpets of doom, consigning the end of the world as we know it to large, blind, and implacable forces (economic, political, cultural, and psychological) that determine the



comings and goings of mice and men. The woeful noise unto the Lord serves as a form of crowd control, instills the habits of obedience, bids up the market in surveillance cameras, restricts the freedom of thought as well as the freedoms of movement. As the secondary means of incarcerating the citizenry in states of paralysis, politics packaged as light entertainment commodifies the voices of dissent, selling the lame-duck cynicism that stands as proof of being in the know, on pace with Bill Maher and Stephen Colbert. Key the laugh track, enjoy the show. History is fate; the way of the world is inevitable.

The notions of historical inevitability, like the reduction of the world in time to noble paradigms and grand abstractions, presume to find the needles of imperishable truth in the bales of perishable straw. They propose a story with no people in it, overlook the fact that every age is an age of anxiety and subject to the humiliation of destabilizing change, forget that none of the onstage dramatis personae enjoy the advantage of hindsight. The course of events is contingent, as likely to turn on a shift in the weather as

on the accidents of human personality. If a heavy fog doesn’t drift into New York Harbor on the morning of August 30, 1776, George Washington’s retreating army, trapped by the British on Brooklyn Heights, doesn’t make good its escape in rowboats across the East River to Manhattan, and if the army doesn’t survive, neither does the American Revolution. Nor does the revolution succeed without the assistance of France, which wasn’t a gift from Adam Smith’s invisible hand. The treaty followed from the particular quality of Benjamin Franklin’s intelligence that allowed him to persuade an absolute monarch to bankrupt his kingdom in order to finance a democratic rebellion.

Nobody, not even Jesus Christ, dies in the country in which he or she was born. George Washington’s America was not the America known to Abraham Lincoln, much less the one that elected General Dwight D. Eisenhower to the White House, a fact of which

I was duly reminded at my fortieth college reunion, in the spring of 1996. The after-dinner speakers marveled at the ways in which things had changed since our arrival on campus in the autumn of Ike’s 1952 election, when a hamburger sold for twenty-five cents, a field-level box at Yankee Stadium for five dollars. They spoke of invisible Negroes becoming visibly black, of homosexuals popping out of closets and nice girls slipping off the silk of feminine restraint, of the interstate-highway system, supersonic air travel, the assassinations of John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, manned spaceflight, the Vietnam War, the transplanted kidney and the artificial heart, Watergate, the end of the Cold War, the Internet.

The class secretary closed down the panel discussions by saying that no generation on the college’s alumni books had weathered so heavy a storm of social and technological change. He didn’t put the motion to a vote, none of the straw hats in the room being inclined to stanch the self-congratulatory flow of beer and sympathy, and it wasn’t until somewhat later in the evening that I ran the numbers. On the day that

I received my diploma in 1956, the class then celebrating its fortieth reunion had arrived on campus in 1912, the year that sank the *Titanic*. The turns of event over the next forty-four years encompassed, among other occasions worthy of note, World War I, the Russian Revolution, American women granted the right to vote, Prohibition, the stock market crash of 1929, the Great Depression, World War II, the Holocaust, the atomic bomb.

Which is to say, as did Mark Twain, that although history doesn't repeat itself, it rhymes. Allow for the variant customs of the country as well as for the geopolitical repositionings on the map of time, and the conflicts going forward at the moment in Washington, Mexico City, and Beijing, like those that enlivened the annals of imperial Rome and the witch hunts in seventeenth-century Salem, are conflicts between time past and time future, between the inertia implicit in things as they are and the energy inherent in things as they might become.

The Roman historian Titus Livy likened history to a collection of "fine things to take as models" and "base things, rotten through and through, to avoid." The contemporary American novelist John Crowley carries the thought another two thousand years along the road to who knows where, suggesting that "the past is the new future . . . its lessons not simple or singular, a big landscape of human possibility, generative, inexhaustible."

**F**ortunately so. We have little else with which to build the future except the driftwood of the past, salvaging from the journey across the frontiers of the millennia what mankind has found to be useful or beautiful or true, on scraps of papyrus and bronze coins, in confessions voluntary and coerced, in five-act plays and three-part songs.

America's Founding Fathers exploited the resource of history as diligently as their descendants exploited the lands and forests of the Ohio River Valley and the trans-Mississippi frontier. They framed their several envisionings of a republic (Hamilton's and Franklin's as well as those of Jefferson and Adams) on blueprints found in their readings of Livy, Cicero, Plutarch, and Seneca.

So in its turn the Italian Renaissance derived from the rediscovery of classical antiquity. The latter progression supplies the scholar Stephen Greenblatt with the premise for last year's best-selling *The Swerve*, which accounts for the death and resurrection of *On the Nature of Things*, 7,400 lines of lyric but unrhymed verse composed by the Roman poet Titus Lucretius Carus in the first century B.C. Greenblatt subtitles his book *How the World Became Modern*, attributing the metamorphosis in large part to the recovery of Lucretius' poem in a German monastery in 1417 by Poggio Bracciolini, Italian humanist, Vatican functionary, and apostolic scribe.

Lucretius had infused his poem with the thought of Epicurus, the Greek philosopher teaching his students in Athens in the fourth century B.C. that the purpose of life was the embrace of beauty and pleasure—that the elementary particles of matter ("the seeds of things") are eternal. Everything that exists—the sun and the moon, waterflies, ziggurats, Mother and the flag—is made of atoms in motion, constantly colliding and combining with one another in an inexhaustible variety of form and substance. The universe consists of "atoms and void and nothing else." No afterlife, no divine retribution or reward, nothing other than a vast turmoil of creation and destruction, the ceaseless making and remaking of despots and matinee idols.

To the modern mind atomic theory is old news, as it was to the schools of Stoic and Epicurean thought during the reign of Augustus Caesar. Christianity dispatched it to Hell, reconfiguring the pursuit of pleasure as sin, the meaning of life as pain. By recovering *De rerum natura* to the land of the living, pooling its resources with those dormant in the works of Ovid, Seneca, and Plato, the Renaissance redrafted the contract between man and nature, its embrace of truth as beauty and beauty as truth made manifest in the glory of its painting, sculpture, music, architecture, and literature. Over the course of the next six centuries Lucretius' poem finds further development and expression in Machiavelli's political theory, Montaigne's essays, Shakespeare's plays, Newton's mathematics, and Jefferson's Declaration of Independence.

The circumstances at hand in the

early years of the twenty-first century suggest that the time is ripe for another redrafting of the contract between man and nature, with any luck of a magnitude comparable to the one that gave birth to the Renaissance. For the past fifty years it has been apparent to the lookouts on the watchtowers of Western civilization that the finite resources of the planet cannot accommodate either the promise or the theory of infinite growth—a.k.a. the American Dream. The simple arithmetic (too many people coming into the world, not enough water, oil, food, phosphorus) underwrites the vast landscape of trouble listed under the headings of worldwide environmental degradation and financial collapse. I read the relevant policy papers—on health, education, debt, poverty, homeland security, climate change, the extinction of species, the wars of all against all—and I notice that they tend toward a common awareness (dimly grasped but distinctly felt) that a global consumer society, if left to its own devices, must devour the earth. Not with malice aforethought, or as a matter of ideology, but because that is its *métier*—the scorpion that kills the frog on whose back it is crossing the river because it knows not what else to do.

The intimations of mortality lurking in the depths of the policy papers lead in turn to the recognition of the capitalist economy as an historical construct, and therefore, like a college reunion and the Colossus of Rhodes, a collision of atoms en route to recombination or the void. A story with a beginning (in sixteenth-century Holland), a middle (the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century industrial revolutions in England and America), and an end (foreshadowed by the financial convulsions of the past twenty years at all points on the free-market compass). Sensing the approach of maybe something terrible slouching toward Wall Street to be born, the lookouts look for salvation in technologies as yet undreamed of by man or machine. My guess is that they're looking in the wrong direction. To acknowledge the truth of the old Arab proverb that says we have less reason to fear what might happen tomorrow than to beware what happened yesterday is also to say that we have more reason to look to the past—history as the phoenix in the attic—for the hope of the future. ■