

Detoxifying the Culture

John A. Howard

America House, 2001

John Howard represents an all-too-rare breed: the “thinking man’s college president.” He began his presidency at Rockford College in 1960 with an Opening Convocation that actually discussed ideas, rather than being a laundry list of administrative and budgetary concerns. No doubt he had to deal with the latter in his role as the chief executive officer of the college, but that side of him never shows in his speeches and essays.

Detoxifying the Culture is a compilation of selected speeches given by Howard between 1963 and 2000. A brief preface is written by Herbert London, president of the Hudson Institute. It is perhaps to be regretted that there is nothing after September 11, 2001, to give Howard’s insights into the current situation. There is value, though, in remaining aware of the issues as they were seen before that catastrophe.

What the book does do is to provide a running commentary on the cultural and intellectual issues of the final third of the twentieth century. Howard’s subject is often the decadence of contemporary Western culture; and, in a voice that is interesting and reasoned rather than strident, he sets off against that decadence a memory of the gentility and striving for excellence that moved Americans a century ago. His model, however, is found not so much in a given point in America’s past as it is in the ideal of a free society founded on Christian religious belief, fixed principles and a virtuous populace. It should be apparent from this how greatly his mixture of classical liberalism and conservatism differs from the “do your own thing” understanding of freedom held by so many libertarians on both the Right and the Left.

The Philadelphia Society was established in 1964 as arguably the preeminent intellectual society on the American Right. It is composed of writers, editors, think tank scholars, academics and other individuals of a scholarly bent, although it must be acknowledged that several highly articulate and thoughtful conservatives remain outside its fold. John Howard is among the thirteen members (six of them still living) who have been elected to “Distinguished Member” status in the Society. It is relevant to a review of his compiled speeches that he ranks alongside Milton Friedman, William F. Buckley, F. A. Hayek and Eric Voegelin, say, in the esteem of his peers.

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He began earning that esteem early in life when he participated in D-Day at Normandy as a member of a tank battalion in the First Infantry Division, where he was awarded two silver stars to go with his two purple hearts.

The twenty-four essays (which is what his speeches are) cover a great many subjects. One that this reviewer found particularly interesting was Howard's elaboration of his own belief-system, especially as it pertains to the prerequisites for a free society. He cites Montesquieu to the effect that a free society requires a virtuous populace. Oddly, this insight is out of place today, when the prevailing assumption is that the society can get along perfectly well, thank you, if the policy wonks just do their jobs as they should, despite quite an evident lack of virtue from top to bottom. That assumption underlay William Clinton's acquittal on the impeachment charges.

Why is virtue a precondition to freedom? Howard says that "in a free society, the characteristic means of achieving cooperation is the voluntary observance, not of laws, but of informal codes of conduct." It is only when those informal codes break down that people call more and more upon government, hoping to find a solution to the untoward reality that people don't act and work together as they should. Today, when "dishonesty, corruption, vandalism, violence, crime, deceit and maliciousness have eaten into all aspects of American reality," the primary cause is to be found in the fact that "an ethos [has been accepted] that rejects private virtue as a public good."

It is arguable that, as a theory of a free society, this insight expresses the classical liberal vision at its best, trumping the unfortunate intellectual tradition of looking almost exclusively to economic and political issues. Howard reminds us that a philosophy of individual freedom needs to be a complete philosophy that takes into account all aspects of the human experience. Culture, aesthetics and morals are every bit as important as a cut in the capital gains tax rate.

Howard's book isn't the systematic, almost textbook-like, treatment of the West's cultural decadence that Patrick Buchanan's *The Death of the West* is, but it will take its place as a significant contribution to the literature on that subject.

Dwight D. Murphey

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**The Final Days: The Last, Desperate Abuses of Power
by the Clinton White House**

Barbara Olson

Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2001

The Federalist Party is remembered, more than anything else, for its unseemly rush of last-minute appointments before Thomas Jefferson took office in 1801. Bill Clinton and his administration will be remembered for lots of things, but assuredly one of them will be the rush of pardons, commutations, agency regulations, expensive parties, solicitation of gifts, and plea-bargaining that marked Clinton's last month in office two centuries later.

Barbara Olson was a former federal prosecutor, legal analyst and counsel to a congressional committee – all of which she brought to bear to produce this hard-hitting, by no means neutral, report centered on the actions of those last few days. I say “centered on” because the book does not limit itself to those events but allows itself to recall a good many other abuses by Bill and Hillary Clinton over a span of several years, going back to their days in the Arkansas governor's office. The result is a brief book (240 pages) that, in addition to being a fascinating read and bringing together in one place the actions of the final days, serves as a useful compendium of the whole sordid history.

It is necessary to speak of Barbara Olson in the past tense. She was among those killed aboard the jet that was crashed into the Pentagon on September 11, 2001. The book had already gone to the printer, but the press-run had not yet been made. Regnery made the decision to go ahead with the publication, after its president says, somewhat inexplicably, there was some agonizing indecision about whether to proceed. The decision was a wise one, since the book is the testament that Barbara Olson would have wanted for what she stood for.

The book is a work of reportage, and it will remain for scholars to analyze what Clinton's behavior, and the American plurality's long condonation of it, means for the presidency, the nature of American democracy, and the cultural milieu of the late twentieth century. Those are subjects that deserve some profound reflection.

Clinton's last minute pardons and commutations came in two waves. The first was the “Christmas pardons” issued on December 22, 2000. Here, he granted clemency to 59 people, who included Dan Rostenkowski (former chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, who had pled guilty to mail fraud); Archie Schaeffer III

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