

understanding. Ancient Athens is often pictured as a zenith of civilization, but the Greeks of Pericles and Sophocles saw non-Greeks as being less than human and didn't hesitate to enslave or indiscriminately slaughter foreigners. The spread of global commerce brings a growing recognition of a common humanity. "You simply cannot do business with people while executing all their male citizens, and increasingly we do business with people everywhere," Wright writes. "In fully modern society, people now acknowledge, in principle at least, that out people are people, too." Wright applauds as well the move toward global kinds of political and economic cooperation, from the United Nations to the World Trade Organization.

Wright concludes *Nonzero* with a discussion of theology, which I find the least impressive or persuasive part of the book. It is filled with the kind of analysis (for instance, about the "seeming superfluosity of consciousness") that once led Ludwig Wittgenstein to describe metaphysics as "language gone on a holiday." The fact that history has evolved in a certain direction—and a direction in which we can take a certain pride or pleasure—is no more evidence of a supernatural cause than the existence of gravity. Wright would deny it, but his speculations are a variation on William Paley's argument that if history, like the watch, has a design and structure, then someone must have designed and structured it. Fortunately, there is an answer to this question that doesn't require the invocation of the supernatural: We—the sorry mass of humanity—have made history, but we have often proceeded blindly and without the least understanding of the great project in which we are engaged. Wright should be content that he has described, better than anyone in recent days, the nature and scope of that endeavor.

JOHN B. JUDIS is a senior editor at The New Republic. His most recent book is *The Paradox of American Democracy*.

Funding Freedom

By Aryeh Neier

THE PROMOTION OF DEMOCRACY worldwide was articulated as a goal of American foreign policy

in a June 8, 1982 address by President Reagan to the British Parliament. Reagan's espousal of this cause had an opportunistic element. At the time, his Administration was preoccupied with developments in Central America where it had "drawn the line" (in Secretary of State Alexander Haig's words) in El Salvador by assisting the armed forces there to fend off a leftist insurgency while covertly organizing a rightist insurgency to topple the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. Reagan encountered resistance in Congress to providing the funds he sought for the Salvadoran war because of accounts by human rights groups and the media of severe abuses by the military there, including massacres of peasants and thousands of death-squad killings. Some in Congress also attempted to obstruct Reagan's war in Nicaragua. Though the Sandinistas persecuted political dissenters and harassed an opposition newspaper, their rule was not so bloody as in nearby El Salvador.

In an attempt to make the case that the human-rights situation was actually worse in Nicaragua, Reagan focused on political developments. The Sandinistas had deferred elections until 1985, six years after they seized power. In contrast, El Salvador had just held elections for its National Assembly that produced televised images of long lines of people in the sun waiting their turn to vote. President Reagan told the British that Salvadorans "braved ambush and gunfire, trudging miles to vote for freedom." Equating human rights with elections, Reagan committed the United States to a global effort to promote democracy. "What I am describing now is a plan and a hope for the long term," the President said, "the march of freedom and democracy which will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash heap of history?"

As Thomas Carothers—who is Vice President of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and widely recognized as the most serious student of foreign-aid programs promoting democracy—shows us, the promotion of democracy has since become an enduring feature of Ameri-

ca's role in the world and President Reagan's stress on elections has remained prominent. It produced the establishment of such bodies as the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, ostensibly private bodies nevertheless paid for by tax dollars. These groups play a key role in promoting free elections—which is one of three elements that form what Carothers calls the

"democratic template" employed by the United States. The two other elements are American-style federalism and separation of powers, and support for "civil society" through non-governmental organizations that promote social and environmental causes, labor unions, and independent media.

Though Carothers is frequently critical of the ways this agenda is carried out, he avoids sweeping indictments or proposals. Mostly, he limits himself to sensible observations about how things could be improved. He wants programs developed with a better grasp of local context, with less reliance on expensive intermediaries, with less political interference by U.S. ambassadors, with greater recognition that building democracy is a long-term process, with greater reliance on local responsibility and, above all, with more modest expectations.

This is a far cry from Reagan's crusade. It is, however, more realistic. Although walking miles and standing in line in the sun to cast ballots is a moving tribute to the people's thirst for democracy, building it requires a lot more than simply organizing an election.

ARYEH NEIER is president of the Open Society Institute.

AIDING DEMOCRACY ABROAD:

The Learning Curve by Thomas Carothers

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, \$3995

Market Failure

By Theodore Marmor

RICHARD EPSTEIN IS AN IDEOLOGICAL zealot who writes clearly and a devotee of 19th-century classic liberalism who thinks a one-size-fits-all philosophy is adequate for every and any subject. In the case of

Mortal Peril, which will soon be released in paperback, and which his publishers hope will create a stir in a renewed debate, the victim is medical care: a subject more resistant than most to an ideological straight-jacket.

Epstein begins by going to extraordinary lengths to argue that citizens should not enjoy the right to medical care. He believes in the centrality of property rights and the virtues of allocating any good or service by willingness and ability to pay, nor does he grant any exceptional status to health, illness, or medical care. In his words, the "major question is: Why is this principle [of equal access] appropriate for health care when it has been rejected for vacation homes and fast cars?" From here, Epstein goes on to criticize the notion of a positive right to medical care as not only philosophically questionable, but economically inefficient and administratively impossible. He questions whether medical care is all that important for health and argues that economic growth (and wealth) explains most of the improvements we foolishly ascribe to modern medicine.

Having made that set of claims, *Mortal Peril* then takes a tour across the vast domain of American medical care. Medicare, he finds foolish. The Clinton health reform plan he regards as idiotic. And the utilitarian and contract enforcing claims he makes for active euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide are not very different from the case for selling body organs. What links these views is the claim that we own our own bodies and that markets (and contracts) are devices of "voluntary exchange" by which the "greatest good for the greatest number" is achieved when supported by the willingness to recognize and enforce contracts. Although no one else has so boldly presented Epstein's utilitarian premises, the clarity of his presentation has the countervailing result: it makes the flaws in his prescriptions and scholarly standards obvious.

The fundamental flaw is that the evidentiary basis of this book is that of a legal brief. To take the area I know the best, Medicare, one clearly sees the tri-

umph of ideological conviction over serious scholarship. To understand the origins and operation of the Medicare program, Epstein relies for intellectual authority on three main, ideologically-transparent sources: *Reason* magazine, The Cato Institute, and the Heritage Foundation. This is a bit like going to a brothel to discuss the merits of chastity. Unsurprisingly, Epstein concludes that Medicare—and its commitment to

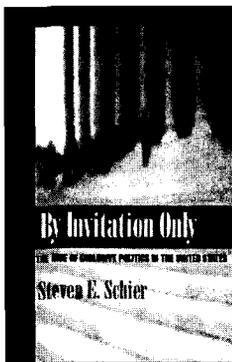
social insurance—does not allocate services as a competitive market would. But, after all, Medicare was created to

ensure access to medical care for the elderly by removing it from the market. To criticize the inefficiencies of non-market allocation without addressing the core issue of fair access begs the question.

Epstein also overgeneralizes in his attack on public programs. "Government programs" like Social Security and Medicare, we are blithely told on page three, "are organized Ponzi operations that eventually go broke by using the capital of later contributors to satisfy the obligations to earlier plan participants." With equal aplomb, Epstein decries medical systems like Medicare that pour "huge sums of money... into

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the last weeks and days of life, money that would do far more for the health of the nation if left in the pockets of young parents to spend on the nutrition and education of their children.”

Medicare now draws about 145 percent of the paycheck of every worker in the U.S. (and an equal sum from the employer). As with any system of social insurance, small proportions of the wages of large numbers of citizens add up. But not only is it unfair to criticize excessive spending on the last days of life (doctors don't know who is going to die and who isn't) there is no shred of evidence that the repeal of Medicare would enhance the health of America's children. In fact, those seeking to cut Medicare have often had long knives out for child health programs, as shown by the efforts of Republicans in 1995 to cut both Medicare and Medicaid (which is a major provider of health care for poor children).

Epstein also allows simple error to masquerade as serious commentary. He laments the “lumbering structure and bureaucratic incentives” of government medical-care programs, generalizing beyond reason. He is sure that government health insurance “chews up huge portions of its revenues in administrative expenses and loses another significant proportion to fraud and abuse at every level of its operation.” This claim is palpably false; Medicare, for instance, is much less costly administratively than private health insurance, spending one to three percent on administration compared with 10-15 percent for private health insurance. (Indeed, there is a good argument that Medicare—and government health programs of the OECD in general—should spend somewhat more on administration so as to reduce fraud, waste, and abuse.) There is simply no comparative scholarship that supports the contention that, among industrial democracies, the public medical sector is the wasteland and the private sector the prudent consumer of administrative dollars. One need only look to the scandals involving Columbia/HCA and Blue Cross in recent years to question Epstein's dogmatic assertion that the government is uniquely wasteful and subject to fraud in its spending of health-care dollars.

To his credit, Epstein does show a

keen sense of the difference between an academic intellectual and a serious manager in an industry like health care. The job of academics, he says, is “to describe and prescribe, and to show how the descriptions we give support the prescriptions we propose.” In a moment of humility, he concedes that such work is “not a manual of how to play the game or a prediction of the particular outcomes that will follow once the rules of the game have been redefined.” Managers, by contrast, have the “task” of finding the “wisdom and courage to know when and how to change doing business.”

This modesty, however, should not be taken seriously. Epstein gives away the game when he concludes that the “comparative advantage of the academic perch is its ability to describe the global consequences that will follow from the rules of the game,” forecasting that arises “largely [from] abstract knowledge of how incentives shape the conduct of individuals who are primarily but not exclusively interested in advancing their own self-interest.”

Financial incentives are not simply one element in explaining human behavior; They are practically the whole story, but one that can be told “abstractly.”

Alas, Epstein believes one can understand social systems through deductive reason, abstractly tracing out what “will” happen from what the “incentives” tell you. He would have a hard time understanding why every other industrial democracy decided long ago that medical care should be allocated differently from “vacation homes and fast cars.” Nor would he find it easy to comprehend—except with the assertion of false consciousness—why other democracies are completely uninterested in any of his prescriptions.

This is a shame since Epstein has, on some subjects, perfectly sensible things to say. He discusses Oregon's health care rationing plan with clarity, properly showing that all medical systems ration in one way or another and that a society cannot give every patient what he wants whenever he wants it. Epstein recognizes the political dynamics that condition our treatment of

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the dark places
from which
terror springs.”**

—Michael Ignatieff, author of *The Warrior's Honour*

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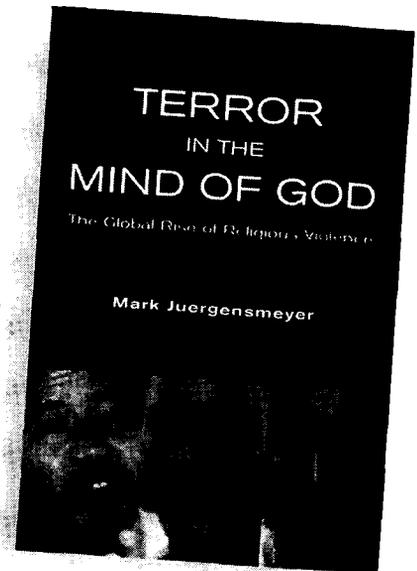
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Medicare and understandably concludes that making medical care a right will further solidify such programs. And, in fairness, Epstein acknowledges the cost-containing potential of global budgets but rightly notes that they “work only as well as the political system that lies behind them.” One could go on with examples of individual claims—or topical discussions—which reveal the clarity with which Richard Epstein can discuss issues. The trouble is that this would be like panning for gold in what is, indisputably, a pile of pro-market rocks.

THEODORE MARMOR teaches politics and public policy in Yale University's management and law schools. His most recent book is *The Politics of Medicare*, Second Edition.

Owning Nothing

By Joshua Rosenblum

ACCORDING TO JEREMY RIFKIN, a peculiar shift, notable especially in the last decade, has taken place in the way that businesses and consumers view physical property and the exchange of goods. “[P]hysical property,” he writes, “is going to steadily migrate from the assets side of the ledger to the expense column... while intangible forms of capital will increasingly find their way onto the assets page.” Physical goods have always served as “containers” for services. For example, a CD has no intrinsic value, only the value of delivering music to your ears. In the age of downloadable music, though, the CD loses its value as a container for music. This trend towards sacrificing ownership of containers for access to their contents, and the undesirable personal and social consequences, form the heart of Rifkin's arguments.

The central reasons he identifies for this change are an increasing pace of technological innovation and a consuming public sated with physical goods. The speed of technological change means that, whether you're a consumer or a business, there is a great risk that your property will become obsolete before you have a chance to

break even on what you paid for it. Why plunk down thousands of dollars for a computer today when you know it'll be half the price or even free in six months?

The second reason is closely tied to the answer to “what do you buy the person who has everything?” in an age when (at least in the most affluent countries) many people have close to everything they need. When even the simplest goods provide much of everything a consumer could want from a utilitarian perspective, what people buy more and more are “lifestyles” or culture. While an Acura may be a fine car, mechanically, it differs little from the Honda on which it is based—in fact, you may be surprised by the name that's stamped on many of the parts under the hood. What consumers are chasing more and more when they buy luxury is not physical comfort, but access to a way of life.

Rifkin argues that, unchecked, these trends lead to a world where the cultural sphere is strip-mined for experiences. Commercialized networks of access then process these experiences and deliver them to captive consumers who companies have spent years profiling and prodding. The results, in Rifkin's mind: millennia-old cultures destroyed and the emergence of a society where empathy and compassion find themselves deadened because sanitized, commercial, paid-for experiences have replaced human interactions.

Rifkin's conclusion is a call to resistance the cultural sphere from the commercial and to fight against a world where access is always negotiable and controlled by a small group of multinational corporations. But nobody forced consumers and businesses to live in this world where constant change and technical innovation make property a liability rather than an asset. Individuals and corporations looked at the costs and benefits of upgrading to the latest and greatest technology and (eventually) made the decision that the benefits won out. Did they make the right decision? Rifkin would presumably say no, based on the social and psychological implications, but it is

hard to argue against a decision that will soon place the power of a 1980 supercomputer in your palm and, with it, instant, virtually free connections to family and friends around the world. In fact, because access-providing companies are more interested in a long-term relationship with you, they may well treat you better than if you had just bought their product.

Rifkin has written a thought-provoking book that is well worth reading. But owning nothing really might not be such a bad thing.

JOSHUA ROSENBLUM creates software and is a freelance writer in Silicon Valley.

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