

---

---

Perspectives on Elitism, Populism,  
And Culture: Three Reviews

## *Unorthodox Reflections of An Elder Statesman*

**Matthew Carr**

*The Catholic University of America*

**Around the Cragged Hill: A Personal and Political Philosophy**, by George Kennan. *New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1993. 272 pp. \$22.95.*

The latest book by George Kennan is a scintillating collection of reflections on the central questions confronting postmodern man. Touching on a multitude of themes in crisp concise passages, Kennan's book is full of profound observations and brilliant insights drawn from his life as a diplomat, scholar, and statesman. Furthermore, given his professed preference for addressing historical and concrete circumstances rather than formulating abstract ideas, Kennan offers his readers a work free of the tortured prose so often associated with contemporary books on politics and philosophy. Kennan's gifted use of the English language makes manifest the great advantages of the historical mind: clarity, elegance, and concreteness. It is not surprising that this book makes no pretense to revealing an absolute world-view or exposing

the hidden truths of man or his society, but instead sets forth Kennan's tentative observations thereon.

In the second part of the book, Kennan dissects the sentiments and tendencies in the American character which have undermined our republican government over the last two centuries. He agrees in principle with Alexis de Tocqueville's contention that egalitarianism is the defining characteristic of American democracy and that it promotes the dangerous centralization and bureaucratization of political power, though he believes that the French aristocrat's predictions of a creeping soft despotism are somewhat overdrawn.

Assessing the extent to which egalitarianism has captured the imagination of the American people, Kennan reminds his readers of its origins as the passionately moralistic sentiment

---

---

which animated Marxism, among other dangerous doctrines, and justified the gray uniformity of the social democratic welfare states of Western Europe and the communist tyrannies of Eastern Europe. Inspired by an egalitarian *Weltanschauung*, man descends into the politics of class-baiting; the sin of envy is transformed into the new virtues of equality and fairness; and the riches of the wealthy are—in the name of promoting the public interest—expropriated in order to feed the Kafkaesque machinery of governance.

Kennan suggests that the unique American judicial power concentrated in the courts and the expanded applicability of court decisions to the entire country have promoted the centralization of power. This has meant in particular the continual transfer of authority from the states, even in matters where they were given specific competence by the U.S. Constitution, to the federal government. Because of this tendency, American political institutions are further propelled to solve all conflicts through federal intervention.

This centralization is compounded by the egalitarian tendencies within the American character which, according to Kennan, especially center on the educational process and the opportunities which spring therefrom. He claims that wealth as such is not what is most envied, but rather the “incidental perquisites—the prestige, the privilege, the enhanced influence.” Indeed, Kennan perceptively notes that the greatest class-baiters are often the very same people whose

most cherished desire is to join those who share the benefits attendant on wealth.

Kennan extends his anti-egalitarianism to a defense of the institution of domestic service, noting that “a society wholly devoid of the very institution of domestic service is surely in some ways a deprived society, if only because it represents a very poor division of labor.” Even more surprising in today’s political environment is his questioning of the wisdom of government-mandated desegregation. In practice, Kennan argues, that policy obfuscates the primary mission of education, damages local autonomy, and ultimately promotes a downward social leveling.

Kennan begins his vigorous apology for elitism with a necessary etymological corrective, pointing out that the word “elite” comes to English from the French *élire*, “elect,” and that the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as “the choice part of the flower (of society, or of any body or class of persons).”

Absent from both the French and the O.E.D.’s definitions is the pejorative connotation appearing in *Webster’s Dictionary*: “a group or body considered or treated as socially superior.” Kennan claims that this negative meaning springs from the egalitarian heritage of American democracy and makes manifest one of the deepest flaws in the American character: its progressive ahistoricism. Ignorance of the past goes hand in glove with the fatuous belief that boundless equality can be obtained either in the present or in some future time

---

---

through perfected electoral mechanisms and bureaucratic procedures.

This vision is clearly refuted by even the most superficial review of history. All civilizations have been organized and governed by a ruling class—an elite. This is true of all of man's societies, irrespective of time and place. Indeed, this condition comes as close to an historical and sociological fact of life as any that the social sciences can produce. Given this historical circumstance from which there is no real possibility of escape—a certainty which Aristotle acknowledged in his assertion that man is a social animal—the operative question is not whether elites are a good idea but rather what are their standards and what are the means used in selecting their members.

The rise of our newest American elite, of whom our current president is an exemplar, illustrates the problem of elite standards. Post-World War II Americans saw themselves as members of the world's greatest meritocracy, representing our national myth in the picturesque American Dream of comfortable consumption and pacific domesticity. However, as the ennui of satisfaction and prosperity nurtured the most privileged of all American generations—the Baby-Boomers—whose educational opportunities and achievements far outweigh those of all the generations that preceded them, a perfidious moralism captured their imagination. The new elite rejected the historical standards of excellence and decency and supplanted them with rationalistic abstractions: egalitarianism, fairness, human libera-

tion. After nearly three decades of crusading for these goals, the very survival of the American meritocracy, even for those who have always had access to its opportunities, is in question.

Related to his defense of elitism is Kennan's skepticism regarding the encroachments upon the republic sought by the proponents of plebiscitarian democracy. While he sympathizes with the critics of the bureaucratization of political power and the consequent limitation of legitimate Congressional power by the Executive and Judicial branches, he rejects populist solutions because they endanger the constitutional order and its protection of liberty against tyrannies of the majority.

Instead, Kennan expresses his preference for Edmund Burke's vision of the representative as trustee. To Burke, the representative is far more than a mere mirror of his constituents' whims because he brings his thoughtful deliberation, his experience, his superior knowledge, and his principles to his esteemed office. Kennan worries that the further spread of democratic egalitarianism, because it ultimately panders to man's basest tastes, will diminish the possibility for a natural aristocracy to strive for excellence and distinction, thereby consummating Tocqueville's prophetic vision of the maternalistic state.

Kennan develops his argument concerning the dangers of excessive centralization by addressing the problems of size. America is an enormous country and suffers many adverse consequences therefrom. There is an

---

---

overabundance of bureaucracy and a predilection on the part of the federal government to solve all questions by judicial or legislative fiat with little or no concern for regional diversity or local circumstances. Kennan points to the controversy over legalized abortion. The *Roe v. Wade* decision crudely nullified the democratically evolving pattern of regulations and restrictions, which reflected America's moral and cultural diversity, and replaced it with a monolithic and arbitrary decree based on abstractions and principles discovered in the so-called penumbra of the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments.

The absolutist position propounded by the majority in this 1973 Supreme Court decision confirms a still deeper trend in modern America: homogenization, the twin of centralization. As bureaucracies—both public and private—invade more and more areas of each American's life, there is a drive to uniformity and simplicity. Categorization becomes the *modus operandi* of administration. It severs any tether to the genuine social, cultural, economic, and political conditions which prevail in different communities. All Americans are conveniently classified into two-dimensional cuts-outs of personality types, consumption patterns, and sampling groups. Indeed, no one need apply for citizenship as an individual since he is transformed by a few forms into codes and numbers representing his vital statistics of race, sex, and national origin.

Kennan laments that bureaucracies are self-engendering and nearly impossible to reform. As they grow in

size and power, more people have a stake in their continued growth, whereas those who oppose them are usually too weak or lack the concentrated attention needed to compel reductions. Kennan paradoxically recommends the creation of another tier of regional governments in the federal hierarchy to represent more fully the collective interests of each section of the country. He contends that federal power could be devolved to these regional governments and in so doing protect regional cultures from the potent homogenizing forces of the free market and Melting Pot assimilation.

Kennan's fondness for diversity does not make him an advocate of open borders. On the contrary, he asserts that uncontrolled immigration will destroy America's liberty and cultural diversity. It presents a significant threat to the survival of the republic and may ultimately overwhelm the indigenous American cultures. Once, America was composed of wide open spaces wherein immigrants constituted a small and limited segment of society. Now, as the annual rate of immigration surpasses historic proportions, Kennan is concerned that America, already overpopulated in his view and pushing its environment to the limits, cannot afford to continue to neglect its sovereign right to control its borders. Too many immigrants will exacerbate these problems and introduce more insidious ones. In particular, Kennan worries that large numbers of immigrants from poor societies will infuse American culture with the values of their societies, thereby ultimately pauperizing America. He

---

---

points to the example of the slow but steady migration of Slavs onto the eastern littoral of the Adriatic Sea, which displaced its Italian inhabitants. Only the relics—palaces, villas, and churches—of their bygone glory remain.

While it is fair to wonder about the extent to which immigrants contribute to the overall social and economic crisis in contemporary America, the problems of perceived overpopulation and environmental degradation have more to do with how men live, than how many live. Kennan's warnings concerning overpopulation and environmental destruction, both of which are debatable concepts, may ultimately play into the hands of those who exaggerate "population pressures" and the abuse of the environment and try to justify measures—abortion, euthanasia, contraception, forced sterilization—which do not address the genuine causes of these situations.

Kennan concludes his discussion of immigration by pleading with American business to kick its cheap labor

habit and thereby decrease its appetite for the importation of inexpensive, easily exploitable labor. It is not only out of altruism that certain self-proclaimed conservatives and liberals support large-scale immigration. This point is especially poignant because of the looming North American Free Trade Agreement with its promises of unlimited cheap Mexican labor for American corporations and of bureaucratic tribunals empowered to supersede the U.S. Constitution in arbitrating trade disputes for American companies.

The foregoing represents only a sampling of what is contained in this work. Kennan tackles many of the great controversies of our times and of all times with surprising and provocative statements. Kennan never fails to leave the reader with an adequate sense of where he stands and on what grounds he adopts his positions. Whether or not one agrees with him, one cannot help admiring his well-crafted, intriguing arguments and his delightful prose.