

The Political Forum

*A review of social and political trends and events
impacting the world's financial markets*

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SUMMER READING LIST, PART II

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In February, 1996, I wrote an article in response to numerous requests from clients for a comprehensive list of books that I think are “must reads.” That piece featured comments on 25 volumes.

I indicated at the time that I would not write any more such pieces, but would respond to future book inquiries by sending reprints of that article. In the ensuing two-and-a-half years, however, several clients have asked that I provide an addendum. So I decided I’d better get to it.

Ideally, I would have written this addendum late last spring, just before “summer reading season.” But I was on the road a lot during that period, and Washington has been hopping all year long, so I waited until things slowed down.

Not much was happening in Washington when I wrote the original piece. Congress was out, and the 1996 presidential campaign had not yet swung into high gear. With the exception of Bill’s legal problems that is the case today. Congress is in session, but the members are spending most of their time posturing for the November elections, the heavy campaigning for which won’t begin until after Labor Day.

Regarding the Starr wars, there really isn’t much that I haven’t already said. In my opinion, the bottom line on last week’s developments, regarding grand jury testimony of secret service agents, is that Bill and his party are in a lot more trouble than either seems to understand.

Yes, the Democrats have a huge number of people on their side in what I regard as a war between two competing moral systems, post-modern versus traditional. But the traditional side in this war still gains significant support from a stubbornly-extant system of laws, which is in turn supported by an ancient infrastructure of lawmakers, courts, prosecutors and tradition. This infrastructure is often referred to as the “wheels of justice,” and history shows that these wheels are difficult to stop once they are set in motion and, more often than not, arrive at the truth.

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I long ago gave up predicting where it all might end. I would say however, that it looks increasingly to me like one step in the process is inevitably going to be an unprecedented national debate over what to do about a popular president who has committed perjury. Anyway, on with the addendum to the old summer reading list.

I'll begin by recommending three outstanding history books, all classics. The first is *The Pursuit of the Millennium* by Norman Cohn. Regular readers will recall that my colleague Steve Soukup and I discussed this book briefly in a recent piece in which we explored the origins of the above-mentioned post-modern belief system.

Angelo Codevilla, who now teaches at Boston College, recommended this book to me a good many years ago as we stood on a beach in Florida discussing the world and its problems. He described it then as "the best book I have ever read." Recently, I came upon a tribute to the late, great Notre Dame professor Gerhart Niemeyer, written by Angelo for the Winter 1997 edition of *The University Bookman*, in which he once again praises Cohn's work. Angelo does it better than I could. So here's what he had to say.

Of all Niemeyer's lessons, his course on "Modern Political Ideologies" stands out. I thank him not least for introducing me to the course's first reading, Norman Cohn's magisterial *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. By detailing the near-identical lunacies developed independently by various late-medieval sects, the book shows that certain intellectual temptations are inherent in Christian civilization. Cohn argues how easily a thirst for righting wrongs becomes an excuse for self aggrandizement, self-deification, and murderous oppression of opponents. The unmistakable parallels between these obscure ideologies and the totalitarian scourges of our century allow us to understand the latter as being among many possible manifestations of a problem we must contend with constantly. No student of Niemeyer believes that the collapse of Communism signals a millennium free of murderous ideologies.

The second history book on this new list was recommended to me not long ago by my good friend Dan Pipes, who runs the Middle East Forum in Philadelphia. This large, 800-page volume entitled *The Rise of the West* was written by the distinguished University of Chicago professor William H. McNeill.

It has been a best seller. It won the National Book Award for history in 1964. It was once described by Arnold Toynbee as "the most lucid presentation of world history in narrative form that I know," and by H.R. Trevor-Roper as "not only the most learned and most intelligent, it is also the most stimulating and fascinating book that has ever set out to recount and explain the whole history of mankind."

McNeill's ambitious project is to trace the development of modern civilization from pre-historic times to today. In doing so he provides a mother load of raw historical information and remarkable insights into world history. His discussion of how the roots of democracy in ancient Greece can be traced to the introduction of the phalanx as a military formation is a fascinating case in point.

But it is the central premise of the book that makes it so pertinent today, namely that the various steps along civilization's path are related not solely within each separate civilization but linked between civilizations. In its broader context, this theme helps to explain, I believe, the tensions that, as the 21st century approaches, threaten peace throughout the world, most especially in the Middle East and China. McNeil puts it this way.

The centers of high skill (i.e., civilizations) tend to upset their neighbors by exposing them to attractive novelties. Less-skilled peoples round about are then impelled to try to make those novelties their own so as to attain for themselves the wealth, power, truth, and beauty that civilized skills confer on their possessors. Yet such efforts provoke a painful ambivalence between the drive to imitate and an equally fervent desire to preserve the customs and institutions that distinguish the would-be borrowers from the corruptions and injustices that also inhere in civilized life.

The third history book on the list is one I discovered on my own in a used book store in New Market, Virginia. It is entitled *The Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World*. I loved it from the moment I open it. And I thought I had made a real discovery, until I told Pipes about it, and he informed me that it is a widely-read classic. What do I know?

The book was written by Cambridge scholar Sir Edward Shepherd Creasy and was first published in 1851. It is still in print, and is today published by Da Capo Press. As the title suggests, the book is a history of those battles that Creasy believed were decisive in determining the course of world history. As might be expected, it begins with Marathon and ends with Waterloo.

Besides providing fascinating insights into the actual conflicts themselves, and the events surrounding them, Creasy ties them together historically with a brief "synopsis of events" between the chapters.

More importantly, he explains why the world would be a different place today had any of these battles turned out differently. The result is a remarkable portrait of the roots of Western culture, and how easily these roots could have been quite different.

The following two quotes concerning the importance the Athenian victory at Marathon in 490 B. C. and of the victory of Arminius over the Roman legions under Varus in A. D. 9 provide a flavor of Creasy's insights, and I hope will help explain why I think this is such a great book.

Had Persia beaten Athens at Marathon, she could have found no obstacle to prevent Darius, the chosen servant of Ormuzd, from advancing his sway over all the known Western races of mankind. The infant energies of Europe would have been trodden out beneath universal conquest, and the history of the world, like the history of Asia, have become a mere record of the rise and fall of despotic dynasties, of the incursions of barbarous hordes, and of the mental and political prostration of millions beneath the diadem, the tiara, and the sword. . .

There seems ample evidence to prove that the Romanized Celts whom our [England's] Teutonic forefathers found here influenced materially the character of our nation. But

the main stream of our people was and is Germanic. Our language alone decisively proves this. Arminius is far more truly one of our national heroes than Caractacus; and it was our own primeval fatherland that the brave German rescued when he slaughtered the Roman legions eighteen centuries ago in the marshy glens between the Lippe and the Ems.

I included just one novel in my original list of 25 “must reads” because, I explained, “tastes in fiction vary too widely.” That one was the great Pulitzer Prize winning poet and author Robert Penn Warren's masterpiece, *All The King's Men*. It is still one of my favorite books.

I have always loved reading fiction, but I seldom allow myself the luxury any more. Someday, when I retire, I plan to consume them like a child does candy, beginning with some of my favorite contemporary authors, Cormac McCarthy, Pete Dexter (an old fraternity brother of mine), Larry McMurtry, and that great American story teller, Stephen King.

In the meantime, I have included two “serious” but altogether wonderful novels on this addendum. The first is Thomas Mann's *Dr. Faustus*. This book was published in 1947, and is thought by many people, me included, to be one of the greatest novels written in the 20th century.

This book, as its title suggests, is a modern version of the Faustian legend. The story, which takes place in Germany in the years preceding World War II, concerns a composer, Adrian Leverkuhn, who sells his soul to the devil for professional greatness, not to mention a tryst with Hans Christian Anderson's Little Sea-maid.

It is not an easy read. But it is more than worth it. On one level it is a book about the many manifestations of evil, from the disguised evil of intellectual slovenliness to the more direct form as manifested in ambition at any cost, vanity and lust. In a remarkable passage, Mann describes it in the devil's own words, in answer to Leverkuhn's question, “So you would sell me time?”

Time? Simple time? No, my dear fere, that is not devyll's ware. For that we should not earn the reward, namely that the end belongs to us. What manner of time, that is the heart of the matter! Great time, mad time, quite bedivelled time, in which the fun waxes fast and furious, with heaven-high leaping and springing--and again, of course, a bit miserable, very miserable indeed, I not only admit that, I even emphasize it, with pride . . . Always the pendulum swings very wide to and fro between high spirits and melancholia . . . we purvey towering flight and illuminations, experiences of upliftings and unfetterings, of freedom, certainty, facility, feeling of power and triumph . . . the thrills of self-veneration, yes, of exquisite horror of himself, in which he appears to himself like an inspired mouthpiece, as a godlike monster. And correspondingly deep, honourably deep, doth he sink in between-time, not only into void and desolation and unfruitful melancholy but also into pains and sicknesse . . . Those are pains which a man gladly pays, with pleasure and pride, for what he has so much enjoyed, pains which he knows from the fairy-tale, the pains which the little sea-maid, as from sharp knives, had in her beautiful human legs she got herself instead of her tail. You know Andersen's Little Sea-maid? She would be a sweetheart for you! Just say the word and I will bring her to your couch.

But this book is, of course, more than just a story about a man's encounter with evil. It is a journey into and exploration of pre-Nazi Germany, a society in which the elite were so smug, so comfortable and so seeped in moral neutrality that individuals could not act against, or even recognize, the tide of ethical and moral decay that was rising around them.

The widespread indifference among most Americans today toward the corruption that engulfs the Clinton White House echoes, I believe, the words of Mann's Dr. Kranich who, while watching Leverkuhn in the final throws of madness, a metaphor for Germany's descent into fascism, says:

This man is mad. There has been for a long time no doubt of it, and it is most regrettable that in our circle the profession of alienist is not represented. I, as a numismatist, feel myself entirely incompetent in this situation.

The second novel on this list has never been, nor is it ever likely to be, acclaimed as one of the greatest of the century. But it could probably be described as one of the most controversial. It is *The Camp of the Saints*, by French author Jean Raspail, winner of the Jean-Walter Prize from the highly prestigious Academie Francaise.

The story is about the destruction of European civilization at the hands of a million or so desperately poor, starving, uncouth and uncivilized individuals, who arrive on the shores of France after a months long voyage in an armada of leaky, dilapidated ships from the region of the Ganges.

This is an extraordinary book. It has been described by various reviewers as "an apocalyptic novel," "a philosophical dissection of the erosion of Western civilization," "a macabre thriller," "a haunting book of irresistible force and calm logic," and "a thriller to make Hollywood pale by comparison." But probably the greatest compliment that could be paid to it is that it has been reviled by liberals since it was first published in the United States by Charles Scribner in 1975. It was recently republished by The Social Contract Press.

The principal complaint of the book's critics is that it is "racist," because it raises the specter of societal destruction by unchecked immigration from a Third World nation. Personally, I don't think it is any more racist than any of thousands of other novels and stories that have been published down through the ages that deal with the tensions that inevitably arise when vastly different civilizations and cultures mix.

I think the objection that most liberals have toward this book has nothing to do with racism. I think it relates to the devastating way in which Raspail portrays the hypocritical and sanctimonious liberal reaction to the news that the flotilla is on the way.

Space doesn't permit too many of the darkly hilarious statements by liberal French intellectuals to the pending "redemption of the Ganges armada." But the following quote will, I think, provide a flavor of Raspail's rhetoric.

To claim that the news of the fleet's departure caused any great alarm in the Western World when it first became known, would be plainly untrue. Which is doubtless why

there was no lack of clever folk, willing, from the start, to spread endless layers of verbal cream, spurting thick and unctuous from the udders of their minds . . . Real world drama, served in the comfort of home by [expletive deleted] Mass Media, only stirs up the void where Western opinion has long been submerged. Someone drools at a current event, and mistakes his drivel for meaningful thought. Still, let's not be too quick to spit our scorn its way. Empty drivel indeed, but it shows nonetheless how reading the papers or watching the news can provoke at least the appearance of thinking. Like Pavlov's dog, whose slobber revealed the mechanics of instinct. Opinion shakes up its sloth, nothing more.

I will close with two books that should have been included on my original "must read" list. The first was excluded due to an oversight on my part. The second didn't make it because I had not yet read it. I have mentioned both many times in these pages, and I apologize for repeating myself on a few points. But no "must read" list of mine is complete without these two volumes.

The first is Cicero's *De Officiis*. The first time I mentioned this book was just over a year ago in an article entitled "The Ends Of The Earth." I can't improve on what I said then, so here it is again.

This book, which despite its rather imposing title is a short, easy read, is one of the most remarkable and influential volumes in Western literature. Voltaire described it as follows, in a "note to Cicero" 1800 years after the great Roman orator's death: "No one will ever write anything more wise, more true, or more useful. From now on, those whose ambition it is to give men instruction, to provide them with precepts, will be charlatans if they want to rise above you, or will all be your imitators."

The book is a manual of ethics and moral philosophy written to Cicero's son Marcus, who was studying in Athens at the time. It is a timeless reminder, studded with fascinating and practical examples, that "the morally wrong can never be advantageous even when it enables you to make some gain that you believe to be to your advantage. The mere act of believing that some wrongful course of action constitutes an advantage is pernicious."

I was reminded of the omission of this worthy treatise from my recommended book list when I read somewhere recently that Bill Clinton keeps a copy of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* on the nightstand beside his bed. I am a great fan of *Meditations* also. Indeed, I included it the above-mentioned list of 25 "must reads." And while I don't keep it next to my bed, I do, in fact, browse through it occasionally, and have given out numerous copies to friends and relatives, including my parents.

Anyway, I couldn't help thinking that *Meditations* was an odd choice of bedtime reflection for someone who is, by all accounts, as a dedicated an Epicurean as Bill Clinton. And I couldn't help but think that if he had chosen *De Officiis* as his nocturnal character builder, he might not need to consult on so regular a basis the thoughts of the great stoic Marcus Aurelius on how to gird oneself to face with courage life's many trials and tribulations.

The second and final book on this list is *After Virtue* by Alasdair MacIntyre. Just as *De Officiis* should have been mentioned in the original article along side *Meditations*, *After Virtue* should have been included along side Eric Voegelin's *The New Science of Politics*. Like Voegelin's book, MacIntyre's is a devastating attack on modern day liberalism by one of the America's leading philosophers.

MacIntyre's analysis is far too complex to present here in its entirety. Simply stated, it is a discussion of the failure of the attempt by Enlightenment philosophers to establish a moral scheme based on reason alone, and the consequences to Western society of this failure.

The efforts of these men were doomed from the start, he says, because they had to reject, due to the nature of their project, the notion that man has "an essence which defines his true end;" that life has a divine purpose, either in the Aristotelian sense that man must fulfill his role as dictated by "nature," or in the theological sense that man must fulfill God's will.

Without such a teleological framework, MacIntyre argues, "the whole project of morality becomes unintelligible," and moral philosophy becomes nothing more than an arena for competing notions that have no basis other than "logic," which is, of course, debatable.

The result of this futile quest, MacIntyre says, was that the Enlightenment philosophers succeeded in eroding belief in the theistically-based moral order of the Middle Ages, but failed to establish an alternative order that would stand the test of time. Hence the fight continues today, in the midst of moral chaos.

The result, he says, is a society in which the meaning of such words as right, wrong, moral, immoral, truth, lie, justice and injustice is increasingly subjective, having no basis other than the passing whim of whichever "expert" happens to be in charge at the time. In such a society, he notes, the statement "This is good" has come to mean nothing more than "Hurrah for this!"

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