

THE RULING CLASS: HOW THEY CORRUPTED AMERICA AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT

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I stay away from the shouters, such as Rush Limbaugh and Mark Levin. Sure, they're right in their conclusions, most of the time, but the lack of nuanced thought annoys me. There are plenty of ways to get easily worked up today, without seeking out more that don't offer a corresponding benefit. Angelo Codevilla is not a shouter, but this is at least a half-shouter book, as shown by that Limbaugh wrote the Introduction. As is the case with most books of conservative woe, it has nothing of substance to offer about how to fix the problems it identifies. Still, it has one interesting insight, and one cautionary lesson. And I am here to offer the solution to the problem Codevilla talks about. It's not even radical!

I chose this book to read as a follow-up to Richard Reeves's *Dream Hoarders*. My review of that book discussed that an American aristocracy has always existed, and is natural, but that our current aristocracy, roughly equivalent to the "upper middle class" on which Reeves focuses, is terrible, fulfilling none of the duties expected of a normal aristocracy yet doubling down on parasitism. I thought that Codevilla's discussion of the Ruling Class might add additional insight, and I was not disappointed, though the insight I found was not actually in the book itself. The frame of this short book is the indisputable fact that the Ruling Class in America is a small minority, which has beliefs radically different from the "Country Class." (Codevilla seems to use "Country" to mean "the rest of the country," not "rural," but it's a bit of a confusing moniker, not helped by its echoes of Robert Walpole and early eighteenth-century English politics, which might be deliberate but are never mentioned.) The Ruling Class corresponds to what conservatives sometimes call the "clerisy," the rotten crust of American society that holds power in government, the news and entertainment media, academia, and big companies, and dictates leftist values to the rest of us, using its stranglehold on all the levers of power. The specific elements that most exercise Codevilla are the Ruling Class's attempts to destroy the family and remove the education of children from parents, the denigration of religious belief, and crony capitalism (including the TARP bailouts and

similar actions—this book was written in 2010, so those were fresh and ongoing), but it's easy enough to create a much longer laundry list. The Country Class, by contrast, is defined more broadly, without an ideology, but “may well be defined in terms of its lack of connection with government,” as well as, generally speaking, by views opposed to the combination of leftist ideology and statist corruption that characterizes the Ruling Class.

Codevilla claims that the Country Class represents a “supermajority.” I am not so sure this is true, and if it is true, it is true at such a high level of generality as to be useless. That is, people answer surveys to the effect they are unhappy with the current party system and with the Ruling Class, but at the same time they gladly accept handouts of taxpayer money (including Social Security and Medicare, along with a vast range of other corruption, such as ethanol mandates), and squeal at the very idea that their handouts, which they earned, dammit!, might be cut. Such people may claim to be part of, and Codevilla may include them in, the Country Class, but they are part of the problem, not the solution, so my guess is that Codevilla's supermajority doesn't exist in any practical form when voting happens. Political virtue, to the extent that it requires any sacrifice at all, has not only left the building but is burning rubber for the county line.

That's the sum of the book, ending with a section addressing solutions. Those are just some meandering attempts to avoid the conclusion that there are no practical solutions. Codevilla implies that he realizes this. Basically, he mutters that we need a *deus ex machina*, which is true, but not very helpful. He is reduced to calling for the Country Class “mobilizing itself against [the Ruling Class] on a principled, moral basis—understanding that the system of privileges is dishonest, and being willing to dispense with whatever threads of it they hold.” Not only is that unlikely, given human nature and the decline in virtue, but the Ruling Class is happy to have the masses dispense with those threads—it will leave more juice for them and their clients, and although it removes a means of direct control if people are no longer accepting handouts, the Ruling Class doesn't need it, since they hold all the cards, including the ability and will to ruin or imprison any member of the Country Class who gets too uppity or who shows signs of causing real problems.

OK, so this book is not wrong, and it doesn't shout as much as I feared, but it told me nothing that everyone paying attention doesn't already know. But I promised both an insight and a lesson. The insight I had after reading this book is that our modern, post-World War II aristocracy is terrible most of all for a reason I failed to clearly identify in my review of *Dream Hoarders*—the reliance of the aristocracy on government. It, roughly the upper middle class, the “professional-management elite,” derives the vast majority of its income and its purpose from entanglement with the government. It drains the public coffers for its benefit, then takes actions to replenish those coffers with money, ever more money, stolen at the point of a gun from those outside the aristocracy. They justify this, and their own rule, with an ideology of government supremacy and control that probably would, without further ado, cause any of the Founders to grab a pistol and shoot the speaker in the face. (Other, non-Western, aristocracies have always obtained money from forms of corruption and control of government, and a very small segment has done so intermittently in America since the nineteenth century, but the size and power of government in all such was vastly smaller than today's government, and they did not derive their purpose from it.) While he does not offer this insight, Codevilla does motion at it when he says, in passing, of the Ruling Class that “their careers and fortunes depend on government.” Without the Cthulhu State, tentacled and malevolent, the Ruling Class could not subsist, since they add no value for anyone and the vast majority have never done an honest day's work in their lives. Without it, they would have to get real jobs. That is to say, our aristocracy is a vampire—and there is only one thing to do with vampires.

And the cautionary lesson? That is something embedded in this book which the author could not have known. It is the fate of the Tea Party movement in Republican politics. This book was published at the height of the movement. While he does not predict victory for the Tea Party, one of Codevilla's repeated points is that the Republican Party cannot continue as it is, because its leaders do not represent the Country Class, but rather are members of, or are subservient toadies to, the Ruling Class. The natural conclusion, and to Codevilla the necessary conclusion, is that either the leadership or the party will be replaced, as with the Whigs in the 1850s. Whether that is true is not clear—as long as

no viable alternative is offered, Country Class voters will be forced to stick with the Republican Party, and as recently as three years ago that seemed like the fixed future. We would get crony capitalism, and Jeb Bush, and amnesty, and all the rest, whether we liked our castor oil or not. Donald Trump, of course, has changed things, though with what degree of permanence and with what long-term effect is totally opaque. Not that Trump is ideal for the purpose of reworking the party system, but we do not choose the form of our Destructor.

My point is that the Tea Party movement, a dire threat to both the Ruling Class and the Republican leadership, was efficiently and effectively destroyed, in less than three years. It was a distributed movement, with no leading group, much less one leading person. This was a strength, in that it was a real grassroots movement, but it was also a weakness, in that it made it easy to isolate the members and destroy their cohesion. We are told the internet makes it easy to form new groups, which is true (although the Lords of Tech now know this, and actively try to hamper conservatives in such efforts), but when you are organized over the internet, it is also easier to feel alone. Knowing this, the Tea Party's Ruling Class opponents combined two extremely powerful weapons—ridicule by the powerful (mostly using obscene slang in the mainstream press and entertainment media) combined with simple lying. For example, they managed to embed the idea in non-leftist voters that the Tea Party had a racist element. That such accusations of racism were complete, unalloyed lies, yet were easily and successfully spread, merely encouraged the Ruling Class. Nowhere was this more in evidence than in the famous example of several Congressmen claiming that they were subjected to racial epithets while walking through a Tea Party rally, a claim disproved by video, to which the Congressmen responded by shrieking louder that it was true, because they said so.

The media acted as the Ruling Class's Ministry of Truth, defending the lies made by other members of the Ruling Class and adding other lies, such as claiming that the Tea Party was an astroturf effort. They then threw up a cloud of confusion to enable exposed liars to slink away, and ensured that the least verbal misstep by any Tea Party-affiliated candidate for election was trumpeted around the clock and nationwide (while, as always, hiding any such misstep by leftist candidates). And, we now know, Obama's government engaged in wide-ranging and

criminal actions to directly suppress the Tea Party, most notably (as far as we know, since by definition the Ruling Class can control most information flow) through the Internal Revenue Service hobbling their activities, including by illegally demanding donor lists so they could harass other involved citizens (a tactic brought to its logical conclusion in Wisconsin with armed nighttime SWAT raids on conservative donors). Rather than being jailed for decades, as they should be, the IRS staff involved were promoted, and have never been punished in any way, although a kabuki dance of pretend outrage was conducted by Republicans in Congress, and by Trump as well. Such effective attacks, combined with the fragmentation inherent to all leaderless groups, quickly destroyed the Tea Party.

(As a side note, such attacks might not have destroyed a leftist group in the exact same position. The Tea Party did not offer a transcendent ideology as the Left always offers its acolytes, which makes it harder to survive attacks. For the most part, conservatives just want to live their lives, not obtain meaning from politics, one reason that leftists always pursue their enemies in a way foreign to conservatives—you only have to look at how Communists were never punished for their heinous crimes after the fall of Communism, but any authoritarian rightist government that falls has its members, none of whom committed any crime equivalent to Communism's, pursued to the ends of the earth.)

So there are the insight and the lesson. But I have a solution to the problem of the Ruling Class. What is the goal of any such solution? To erode their power. We now realize that their power and importance revolves around, and grows in sympathetic symbiosis with, the government. We have seen we can't vote them out of power or cut government as such. But what if we simply made it less appealing to be involved with government, changing nothing else?

As I suggested in my review of *What Washington Gets Wrong*, rustication is the answer. In brief, no element of the federal government other than the President and a core staff, Congress and a skeleton staff, and the Supreme Court, should be allowed to have its headquarters located, or more than two percent of its staff and contractors combined, live or work within three hundred miles of Washington, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, or Los Angeles. Instead, each element of government should be scattered in numerous small satellite offices randomly and

evenly geographically distributed around the country, including Alaska and Guam, with only a small percentage in any metropolitan area with more than, say, 250,000 people, and the majority in metropolitan areas of less than 50,000 people. Office space should be mostly “C” grade, with a fraction of “B” grade. Any existing office buildings owned by the government should be sold immediately. In these days of electronic communication, there is no downside to efficiency as a result—in fact, efficiency should go up, as the Ruling Class is able to focus on work, not on the distractions that the Capitol of Panem offers. They will actually get a raise, because their pay will be worth more in places with a lower cost of living. Much more could be developed along these lines, such as placing similar restrictions on lobbyists and businesses that receive government dollars; placing a ten- or fifteen-year absolute bar on being employed, directly or indirectly, in any capacity with government, after leaving government employ; and making it a condition of employment that all children of the government employee attend public schools. But you get the idea—the Ruling Class will have less reason to be involved with government, and they will start to get real jobs.

In the current environment (which I expect to change, but that is another discussion), this is much less of a pipe dream than would be, say, a reactionary reworking of the entire government. In fact, you might be able to get a new political party formed behind this program. Most people would regard this as a common sense reform, and a legitimate and long overdue reaction to overweening government dominance. Critically, they would not see it as a threat to their own turn at the trough. Certainly, the Ruling Class, that is to say, millions of those whose only role and purpose in their careers and lives comes from leeching off the taxpayers, would howl. That would include the leaders of both the Democrats and Republicans. They wouldn’t have any good arguments, though. Nobody is getting hurt in the least. Nobody would even lose his job. Members of the Ruling Class who didn’t want to move could simply find private sector jobs, anywhere they wanted. Government spending, as far as delivery of services, would not decline at all. The poorer areas of the country would benefit as federal dollars were spent on them. No longer would counties contiguous to Washington, D.C. constitute seven of the top ten richest counties in America—they would quickly become among the poorest, which would be all to the good, especially since we

could skip repairing the Metro. Perhaps the best way to accomplish this would be a constitutional amendment, to ensure no future backsliding, and I think that with the right leadership this might be possible, though maybe only through the Article V convention method. And once underway, this program would build on itself, since as the Ruling Class's power eroded, it would become easier to erode further.

This wouldn't restore virtue to America. Codevilla motions at the heart of the matter when he says, in passing, "resistance to that rule [of the Ruling Class] . . . must deal with secularism's intellectual and moral core. This lies beyond the boundaries of politics, as the term is commonly understood." True enough, but we can get the party started, and with a little bit of luck, it'll turn into the kind of party that improves the nation as a whole.