

Daniel J. Mahoney, *The Statesman as Thinker: Portraits of Greatness, Courage, and Moderation* (New York: Encounter Books, 2022), \$30.99 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-64177-241-9

Alexis de Tocqueville and Abraham Lincoln stand as major figures in numerous studies and self-understandings of American politics and American history. Both figure as the subjects of the central chapters of Daniel J. Mahoney's *The Statesman as Thinker: Portraits of Greatness, Courage, and Moderation*, a work which situates itself in relation to "the culture of repudiation" (xi; 137; 217; 221) increasingly prevalent in America and beyond its shores.

The decision of the San Francisco Board of Education in January 2021 to rename (or de-name) Abraham Lincoln High School and George Washington High School, among other public schools, instantiates the proximate challenge to which Mahoney's volume is a direct response. "George Washington sacrificed a great deal to help establish a regime of liberty, and he subordinated narrow personal ambition to an austere sense of public duty and reputation well earned," Mahoney contends (109). "But in the emerging dispensation that is replacing our old constitutional order, the fact that he owned slaves must negate everything else, come what may" (109).

It is in this context that Mahoney works out a political psychology of "the culture of repudiation" or what is sometimes referred to as "cancel culture." Cancel culture, on Mahoney's presentation, is based on ignorance and a discomfiture with nuance, context, and seeing things in the round. Cultural repudiation is a kind of vicious circularity of censorious ignorance (124n6). Mahoney argues, in the case of Washington, that many critics are unaware that our first president freed his slaves in his final will and testament and provided for their education and economic sustenance. Whatever one thinks of this argument, the image of ignorance enraged and angrily perpetuating itself is one to which thoughtful proponents of repudiation might reasonably be expected to rebut with rational counter-argumentation.

Mahoney is equally defensive of Lincoln, "the greatest of our presidents and surely the most philosophically minded" (111). Mahoney stresses that, in Lincoln's eyes, "Black men and women were children of God endowed with natural rights" (123) and highlights that "Lincoln's critics then and now fail to appreciate that the union that Lincoln was constitutionally pledged to preserve was one that was antislavery to its core" (124). On these questions, Mahoney reads Tocqueville and Lincoln as thinking in concert. "For the most part, Tocqueville scholars," Mahoney writes, "haven't noticed that their subject's positions on union, liberty, abolitionism, and the expansion of slavery are in decisive respects the same as Abraham Lincoln's" (101).

In reading of Lincoln and Tocqueville on slavery as sharing a common set of presuppositions, Mahoney roots both of their intellectual stances as emerging from a shared culture of Christian faith and commitment. Mahoney is interested in what his subjects think or thought about the first and last things from matters of family and friendship to the shape and order of the universe (or lack thereof). Mahoney is thereby keen to draw out the social and ethical background of Christian faith and Christian ethics from which and out of which his subjects emerged (67; 123; 166; 183; 196).

Subtling his work *Portraits of Greatness, Courage, and Moderation*, Mahoney silently juxtaposes his portraits of courage with and against the better-known *Profiles in Courage* by America's thirty-fifth president. Where Kennedy profiled eight senators, Mahoney portrays eight philosophically-minded statesmen. Where Kennedy profiled Quincy Adams, Webster, Hart Benton, Houston, Ross, Lamar, Norris, and Robert A. Taft, Mahoney portrays "Cicero, Burke, Washington, Tocqueville, Lincoln, Churchill, de Gaulle, and Havel" (x). With some exceptions, the subjects profiled by Kennedy have now faded more from common memory (in some cases at less temporal distance) than the subjects of Mahoney's portraits. In the view of the book taken as a whole, a profile may be only a silhouette or ripple outlining a shadow or outlining a shade. A portrait, by contrast, paints a fuller picture. Courage is always exerted on behalf of something, and great courage requires a high aim and a steady course. Whatever the courage of Robert A. Taft in critiquing certain post-WWII trials, Mahoney's book indicates that this pales in comparison to the real sacrificial courage of a Lincoln in preserving the Union and of a Churchill or de Gaulle in defending

Europe (and the world) from the true horror Nazi rule. *The Statesman as Thinker* almost raises the question of whether the President or the professor has seen further into the nature of courage and the contours of human greatness.

The Statesman as Thinker collects and reforms a number of Mahoney's critical essays published previously. Yet Mahoney's reworking of these essays into a continuous whole makes the volume more than the sum of its parts and allows to the reader to see common themes both amidst the thinkers treated within the book as well as offering a glimpse at core attributes of Mahoney's own approach to the history of political thought. In Mahoney's view, great subjects of study – great writers, great philosophers, and great political actors – have the potential to uplift readers by making readers more like these figures (yet only if readers open themselves to such figures so understood). Conversely, in Mahoney's assessment, contemporary scholars often substitute their own presuppositions and predilections for a fuller understanding and appreciation of their subjects of scholarly study.

For example, Mahoney critiques Hugh Brogan's reading of Tocqueville for "confus[ing] democratic self-government with absolute popular sovereignty" (86). In assessing Tocqueville's achievements, Mahoney writes, "Brogan himself shares so many of today's egalitarian prejudices. For him, democracy is an unqualified good, and anything that challenges it is evidence of aristocratic nostalgia, narrow class interest" (83). By contrast, Tocqueville in Mahoney's rendering is motivated by a will to see, a desire to know, and a will to understand the democratic revolution unfolding about him beyond party, nostalgia or class. This shift of understanding at the level of motivation leads Brogan, on Mahoney's telling, to mistake the ground of Tocqueville's thought in projecting twenty-first century preferences in place of an effort to understand Tocqueville as the philosopher understood himself (82-83). On Mahoney's reading, "No one can reasonably accuse Tocqueville of opposing socialism in the name of oligarchy or the selfishness of the privileged classes. He wanted to relieve the plight of the poor without creating a new and deadly despotism" (96).

While Mahoney's reflections center upon American leadership in Lincoln and Tocqueville's analysis of democracy, Mahoney's book is not exclusively confined to these themes. "There can be no authentic political science," Mahoney writes, "no genuine understanding of human beings and society, without a willingness to give the proper conjugation of greatness, courage, and moderation its due" (154-155). Looking to contemporary scholarly approaches, Mahoney's interest in how to write political history and how to study political ideas finds a welcome (if perhaps unlooked for) parallel in the work of Faisal Devji and Shruti Kapila, whose studies in the history of global and Indian political thought esteem political actors for the shape and contours of their ideas and ideals. Mahoney's *The Statesman as Thinker* makes a strong case for aiming to understand political thinkers (and political actors) in the round, in all their fullness and nuance, as they understood themselves.

Samuel Garrett Zeitlin, University College London