



# **Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics Is Destroying American Democracy**

*Jonah Goldberg*

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**With his trademark blend of political history, social science, economics, and pop culture, two-time NYT bestselling author, syndicated columnist, *National Review* senior editor, and American Enterprise Institute fellow Jonah Goldberg makes the timely case that America and other democracies are in peril as they lose the will to defend the values and institutions that sustain freedom and prosperity. Instead we are surrendering to populism, nationalism and other forms of tribalism.**

Only once in the last 250,000 years have humans stumbled upon a way to lift ourselves out of the endless cycle of poverty, hunger, and war that defines most of history—in 18th century England when we accidentally discovered the miracle of liberal democratic capitalism.

As Americans we are doubly blessed that those radical ideas were written into the Constitution, laying the groundwork for our uniquely prosperous society:

- Our rights come from God, not from the government.
- The government belongs to us; we do not belong to the government.
- The individual is sovereign. We are all captains of our own souls.
- The fruits of our labors belong to us.

In the last few decades, these political virtues have been turned into vices. As we are increasingly taught to view our traditions as a system of oppression, exploitation and "white privilege," the principles of liberty and the rule of law are under attack from left and right.

At a moment when authoritarianism, tribalism, identity politics, nationalism, and cults of personality are rotting our democracy from within, Goldberg exposes the West's suicidal tendencies on both sides of the ideological aisle. For the West to survive, we must renew our sense of gratitude for what our civilization has given us and rediscover the ideals that led us out of the bloody muck of the past - or back to the muck we will go.

Suicide is painless, liberty takes work.

## **Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics Is Destroying American Democracy Details**

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## From Reader Review Suicide of the West: How the Rebirth of Tribalism, Populism, Nationalism, and Identity Politics Is Destroying American Democracy for online ebook

### E says

This book is a lot meatier than I might have expected. It is not merely a screed against "liberals these days." Instead it is a consideration of the last 400 years of western civilization. How did we arrive at a point where the free market was valued, individual rights were protected, and private property was sacrosanct? And how have we maintained these characteristics these past several centuries? And how are they now in peril?

Goldberg goes to great length to show how miserable poverty was the lot of the vast majority of mankind for 10,000 years. But then, starting somewhere in the 1600 or 1700s, suddenly large portions of the west were rapidly growing out of subsistence poverty into much higher standards of living. And we have now exported these values around the world, so that even places as far-flung as Singapore or South Africa are enjoying many of these same benefits.

Goldberg traces the political and moral developments that have made this world possible. He pits Locke against Rousseau, showing how it is the inheritors of Locke who have secured the liberty of the masses, while it is the inheritors of Rousseau who are threatening to pull it all down. It is at this point that one would normally consider the impact of Protestant Christianity, and of the God it espouses, but Goldberg is quite loath to do so. He from the start admits that this will be an atheistic account, even though he himself is not an atheist. He sees faith as an important story we tell ourselves that impacts how we behave, but is unwilling to go much further than that. He certainly does not want to discuss the Christian ethic and its impact on, say, private property or entrepreneurialism. I recommend Douglas Wilson's critique of Goldberg on this point.

The second half of the book transitions from this historical discussion to a look at the state of America's political landscape today. Here Goldberg hits many well-known points: the need for mediating institutions, the dangers of populism, the weakness of the modern family, the insidious rise of progressivism, especially under Wilson and FDR, etc. Goldberg also points to how the middle class tends to produce offspring deficient in gratitude for what has come before. The children of the middle class go off to fancy colleges that badmouth everything that allowed the student to have the sort of background to attend the pricey university in the first place. Goldberg stresses again and again the need for gratitude, even if he lacks the proper recipient for said gratitude.

I would recommend this work to anyone. The first half is more philosophical than some might welcome, but it is worth pushing through in order to understand the underpinnings of much of western civilization (despite his royally screwing up the religious aspect--and it's a lot more than just an "aspect") and how we must work hard to shore it up. Beyond the Ben Sasses of the world, I'm not sure anyone in Washington is paying attention. But that's no excuse for the other 99.99% of the country. We will be held responsible for how we handle the incredible privileges we have been given. Let us not we found wanting.

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### Richard says

*Just to clarify: this is not a review, but notes I've written about the reasons I want to read Goldberg's book, and my expectations (Bayesian priors, if you will.) The book's publication date isn't until 24 April 2018.*

Jonah Goldberg is attacked from the right as a RINO (Republican in name only), not because he is a liberal in disguise but because he is disloyal to and willing to criticize members of the GOP who advocate the exercise of power in ways he considers antithetical to conservative principles.

I'm a liberal, but I've spent the last few years studying the trap of partisan *tribalism* which has captured political discourse in the United States. That has led me to disassociate myself from either tribal party. If pressed to be precise, I'll admit that I still *caucus* with the Democrats as a voter, but I despise equally the hatred and unthoughtful anger that both tribes use to "excite the base" and push their agenda.

I read Goldberg's weekly G-File column to get the perspective of a thoughtful critic of his own tribe, but I'm usually somewhat disappointed.

Despite his critics, he's still firmly a member of the conservative tribe.

How can I tell?

Because while he is quite careful in the use of logic when criticizing his own party, he throws out any subtlety when criticizing the enemy. It really doesn't take long to find evidence: just look at any of his references to "the Democrats" and you'll find him painting with a brush a continent wide. Of course, if he admitted that *some* liberals weren't cretinous miscreants and are actually both smart and well-intentioned, he'd lose the rest of his credibility and probably his career.

I continue to read him (despite the sizable volume of monetary solicitations that encourages the National Review to send me) because his attacks on the tribalism of the right are enlightening. And, frankly, reassuring. But I'm doubtful that he will prove to be a useful contributor to the more profound debate on how the cognitive instinct towards tribalism is a general societal poison. He is viewing the problem through an ideological lens — just look at the bullet points he and his publisher chose for his blurb, and you'll find a strong statement of politically conservative axioms.

(As a counter to the "individual is sovereign" bullet point, for example, the recent *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals About Our Future* discusses how the Enlightenment emphasis on individualism is in contradictory tension with our species' evolutionary instinct towards tribalism. Note that all of Goldberg's other bullet points emphasize the societal *we* instead of the "sovereign" *I* and you should be reminded of the contrast between libertarianism and various other forms of conservatism.)

Still, an important part of the solution to the general problem requires a careful consideration of the arguments one might not agree with, and might even find threatening to one's cognitive identity. So it goes on the to-be-read shelf.

And then: Goldberg was interviewed on KQED Forum in May: *Jonah Goldberg on How Tribalism is Threatening American Democracy*. I shouldn't have been surprised that he sounded more reasonable than I expected, but I was. I suspect there were two reasons for that. First, he's speaking to a broad audience and doesn't want to alienate potential ~~readers~~ *book buyers*, so he is going to tone down the partisanship. But the second is that his day job, as it were, is mostly preaching to his own church. Yeah, he's famous for being critical of Trump, but that doesn't mean he isn't going to play to his audience and be scathing towards the real opposition. But the book is, again, to a broader audience, so there's no rationale for entertaining the troops (sorry for the mixed metaphors).

So maybe the book will be better than I'd hoped.

## **Douglas Wilson says**

Really enjoyed it, apart from hanging inalienable rights from somewhere in the stratosphere.

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## **Lynell says**

Read something that makes you yell at the audiobook every now and then...

Saw the author on The Daily Show and he had some interesting thoughts in promoting his book, so I downloaded the audiobook.

Positive: Interesting historical recitation, including relating several schools of philosophy to his thesis that the current state of American democracy is active decay. Interesting juxtaposition of some social-psych research, which I have read in my academic career.

However....

He has a MASSIVE habit of conflating unsubstantiated thoughts he has about the world with certain research and making sweeping generalizations - and even contradicting himself.

Heavy on the "good old days were better for the world" rhetoric... again, good for whom? And the "traditional family structure" (1 man 1 woman raising children) is "better" for society. He compares statistics from 60 years ago to the status of the family etc. now. He rests on numerous assumptions as to what should be considered "better."

I don't wholly disagree with everything he says... I mean after all, he is clearly obsessed with Game of Thrones (haha... SO MANY GOT references!)

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## **John Martindale says**

I really appreciated Goldberg's tone and approach, this book was much more in the spirit of Jonathan Haidt, than that of more resent works of Dinesh D'Souza. Goldberg of course has strongly held opinions and beliefs, but the work didn't seem polemical.

He held my interest throughout the book, and had very interesting reflections on why there seems the perennial pull towards tribalism, and this even after the west fortuitously stumbled upon ideals and ideas that have tempered our tribal inclinations, encouraged civility, tolerance and prosperity.

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## **John Devlin says**

Suicide is a distillation of much of conservative thought in today's America.

Capitalism is great, the family is great, community is great, and the State's rise is killing all the former.

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And I wholeheartedly agree.

The grander assertion is that the West is failing bc the folks are ignorant, oblivious, easily distracted, and given over to a Oakland Raider like sensibility towards their team against all the others.

And I wholeheartedly agree.

Goldberg goes onto discuss Trump and his rise, and like him i was a NeverTrumper bc I bristled at the cult of personality that seemed to arrive with him. After all, factually, Trump was a golden spooned, draft avoider, four time bankrupted philanderer, who said ludicrous and grandiose nonsense at a herculean rate.

Also, I didn't believe he would do the things he ran on. After all, he had been Republican, Democrat, unwilling to state, and the Independence Party member.

But he has done much of what he promised, and furthermore, a media, I knew to be Leftist, has been revealed to be far more malignant than I would ever have imagined. An analogy I used elsewhere was I thought the Media was a serious rash on the body politic, but the fourth estate has actually been revealed to be a stage 3 cancer. Trump is an antidote to a Media that went from reporting the news, to deciding what was news, to deciding what the folks should think about the news they decided on.

But if Trump is an antidote he's not a palliative but a purgative. Vomiting is never pretty and either is the Donald, but in this case I question whether any other prescription would've worked.

Nevertheless, I don't disagree that the US and the West are in decline. Shrug, all great empires fall. The question becomes will capitalism and the technology unleashed allow for a greater quality of life for the humans on this planet or will the West's demise augur a steeper breakdown into something unseen since Constantine's vision of Christ.

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## **Gary Moreau says**

“I hope readers see this as a serious book.” Mission accomplished. It is the most serious book I have read among the abundant crop of recent books on political economy. But if the original manuscript was twice as long, as the author claims, my thanks to the editor. As happy as I am that I read the book, I was ultimately satisfied to put it down.

Goldberg is a conservative Enlightenment-liberal capitalist. Neither an admirer of Trump and the alt-right or the progressive left, some will think of him as a traditional conservative and, as such, a rather devout constitutionalist. He rejects both tribal populism and progressive identity politics, although he sees tribalism and the need for identity as hard-wired into our DNA.

It is always dangerous to summarize another person's thoughts, but that's what a book review is. Goldberg argues that true human progress only began with the Enlightenment and that it flowed from the adoption of considered thought that runs contrary to all of our natural instincts. It began, organically, with John Locke and the Glorious English Revolution of 1688, and continued, by choice, with the Declaration of Independence, the US Constitution, and the founding of the US.

The challenge facing every student of life, but particularly acute among historians, is the fact that reality is

complex. It can be sliced into a large number—some believe infinite—number of dimensions and interconnected variables. (Historians, as Goldberg points out, fall prey to only connecting the dots they expect to see.)

Science and empiricism both help and hinder the process. They help because they provide an objective methodology for isolating variables. They hinder because they require the successful isolation of variables that are causal and not superficially contributory or coincidental.

The key to understanding anything, therefore, is context. Is it truly knowable? Or are we destined to scratch away at the surface? And the answer, of course, depends on whom you ask what.

I don't refute Goldberg arguments but I do refute some of his conclusions. And the difference in our two views is, in my words, one of context. Ultimately, Goldberg's arguments, while powerful, strike me as unnecessarily binary. He divides the world of political economy into Locke and Rousseau and, as a result, you are either an empiricist (him) or a romantic (admittedly, me). And he doesn't mince his words on how he feels about each.

That's a bit unfair and I am falling into the same trap, although to no more degree than he does, created by the limitations of language. Language is a human convention, after all, and tends, in the interest of efficiency, toward binary expression. Something to always keep in mind when reading any book.

Goldberg makes several key points that seem unassailable, including the importance of "earned success" to human fulfillment. It is also indisputable that we have witnessed a decline in what he calls "mediating institutions" (e.g. family), those formal and informal institutions that have historically provided a buffer between the individual and the state, and that this has contributed to our political and social decay. And his repeated contention that maintaining the benefits of liberal democracy takes constant care and attention. (He uses the gardener metaphor frequently.)

I would also agree with Goldberg that neither political party has defined a productive way forward. I must take exception, however, perhaps out of wishful thinking, with his conclusion: "Because when you are at the top of a mountain, any direction you turn—be it left toward socialism or right toward nationalism or in some other clever direction—the result is the same: You must go down, back whence you came."

I'd like to believe that there is a third way other than the conservative bare-knuckle Locke-ism that he seems to favor or the progressive politics of identity alone. To me the problem is not the celebration of the individual as much as it is the current emphasis on "me." Me-ism is much more selfish than individualism and flows, as Goldberg points out, from the ignorance of data overload served up through closed loops and a certain ingratitude, or "forgetfulness", for what we do have.

One of the omissions that I believe contributes to Goldberg's ultimately binary way forward is his perceived lack of the impact of the rise of the corpocracy. He fully acknowledges that capitalism is impartially disruptive, but he never really takes exception with the asymmetric power currently assigned to the elite multi-national banks, hedge funds, and corporations that have taken over the political process due to the latter's reliance on funding for its power.

He devotes an entire chapter to lamenting the lack of accountability in "The Administrative State", the so-called shadow state, but gives virtually no space to demanding the same accountability among our corporate nobles who have gone to far as to give our private information away, let the Russians reach into the electoral process, and incentivize their employees to forge fake accounts without our consent, much less to collapse the global economy (2008), all without anyone ever being held accountable. It is not that capitalism or free markets are bad, but they are perverse when power is applied asymmetrically because of a lack of regulation or an over concentration of monopoly powers.

There has to be a way forward the draws the best from both Locke and Rousseau—and Marx and Smith, among others. And to me it has more to do with overcoming the ultimately irrational lust of “me” with some acceptance of the value of “we.”

Having said that, yes, this is a very serious book, superbly written, and it deserves to be read by all.

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### **Elise says**

Read my review at Journalingonpaper.com <https://journalingonpaper.com/2018/03...>

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### **Erin Cohenour says**

I finished this by sheer force of will. I came across Jonah Goldberg in an NPR interview and followed him on Twitter in my quest to try to see the “other side” (aka conservatives.) He seems like a smart, decent human being. But I’m rethinking that after subjecting myself to this slog of a book. The main argument- that society progressed rapidly after millennia of brutal inequality and we could do well to appreciate that we aren’t wallowing in the medieval muck anymore- is salient, but can also be made in about fifteen pages. This book is bloated, meandering, and frankly boring. With such brilliant insights as “white men passed the Civil Rights Act!!!111” it reads more like a ridiculously long Reddit post from someone who thinks they’re really smart because they read a lot of Breitbart. I appreciate that he gives credit where credit is due, and I suppose I learned a few things, but this book didn’t need to be written and you probably don’t need to read it.

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### **Charles says**

I think this book is meant as a #NeverTrumper manifesto, an attempt to create intellectual backbone for that wispy band of conservative holdouts, who crouch behind the crenellations in their National Review fastness, wondering why the final assault on them has yet to begin—not realizing it is because everyone has forgotten about them. Strictly speaking, though, I have no idea what the point of this book is, because it’s a jumble of thoughts, anecdotes and superficial facts, strung together with no clear audience and only the most simplistic of analysis. It’s a boneless mess. And I’m very conservative, so I should have liked this book. But I didn’t.

The miniscule hard core of Goldberg’s argument is clear enough, to be fair, mostly because it is repeated like a prayer on a Buddhist prayer wheel. It is that we, the West, have created a world that is a “Miracle,” and we are in danger of losing it by our actions. From there, though, chaos promptly enters Jonah Goldberg’s writing, blurring it to incomprehensibility. One of the major problems with this book shows up immediately—a miserable failure to precisely define, or even to try to define, every crucial term, starting with “the Miracle.” The second major problem also rears its head quickly—constant bootstrapping and begging the question. For example, on the very first page we are told that “the highest form of argument in a democracy is one based on facts grounded in reason and decency.” Why is this limited to democracy? More broadly, why is this true? What is “decency” in this context, and what is it doing here, especially since in the prior sentence Goldberg rejects any role for religious belief in his analysis? Who knows? Not the reader, certainly, at any point in this book.

Let's start with the most simple question—what is this “Miracle”? At first, the reader intuits it is the material progress made in the modern world, represented at its core by GDP per capita, globally and within certain regions and countries. This is well-trodden ground, covered recently by everyone from Angus Deaton in “The Great Escape” to Gregory Clark in “A Farewell to Alms.” Even this simple, because wholly derivative, discussion of material progress is obscured by hurried denial of all causes other than “ideas,” by which Goldberg means “Enlightenment political ideas,” having rejected in all of five words that the Scientific Revolution had any relevance, and not having addressed a single one of the vast number of competing theories advanced to explain this material progress. Not happy to limit himself to one facile claim, at other (repeated) points Goldberg, without discussion, also directly equates the “Miracle” with being the same thing as “liberalism” and as “capitalism.” Again, none of these terms are ever defined (leaving aside for now that under any definition, these are indirectly related to material progress at best). “Liberalism” seems to be shorthand for “Enlightenment ideas as embodied in John Locke,” though it is also casually and ludicrously equated with the rule of law, with an implication that pre-Enlightenment such a thing did not exist and could not have existed. “Capitalism” seems to bear some relation to the “free market,” but is often used in a sense so broad as to have nothing to do with the market, and is sometimes tied to the Enlightenment, or to certain political ideas, sometimes not. Interspersed with all this are various simplistic conclusory statements such as a claim that, until the West magicked up the undefined “Miracle,” all governments were solely and entirely devices for the elites to exploit the masses, and a wide variety of other non sequiturs and claims advanced without any evidence or reasoning.

The second step of the Goldberg “analysis” is that, assuming we agree that in the West, we have gotten ourselves a “Miracle,” we are in danger of committing suicide (a very different suicide from that James Burnham identified in the book from which Goldberg steals his title). For Goldberg, “suicide” is any retreat from liberal democracy, the apogee both of our civilization and of any civilization that can ever exist, a height from which no further advances are possible. Suicide is any slipping back down the mountain, which necessarily means a total reversion to a nightmare of tribalism. Goldberg says “[a]fter thousands of generation of trial and error, we discovered ‘best practices’ out there in the world, like prizes in some eternal scavenger hunt.” He says explicitly there is no better way; “You’re standing at the end of history.” What that means is opaque (although he is very much aware that Francis Fukuyama is widely ridiculed for a similar, but at least clearly presented, claim), but it appears to mean mostly that we’re rich, since “no other system creates wealth.” And so on. There is a danger, though. That is backsliding, which means “corruption,” “decay,” a turn to the “reactionary,” “giving in to the drumbeats of our primate brains,” “rot,” and “putrefaction”—all in the space of one page, and all meaning choosing anything different than (take your pick) liberalism, capitalism, or liberal democracy.

Leaving aside its mental confusion (we’ll return to it, don’t worry), *Suicide of the West* is a common type of modern hack political book—the narration of (cut-rate and cut-down) history masquerading as analysis. For, after all, narrating history is a lot easier than analysis, so spreading a thin layer of thought on a slanted rehash of history is an easy way to push out a book. And although Goldberg cites a variety of mostly modern, though all secondary, works that revolve around modernity, a lot of his footnotes are to lightweight material: blog posts, newspaper articles, the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and so forth (and those that are books often cite to “Kindle location,” a miserable practice that should be forbidden by any decent press).

So, Goldberg begins the “substance” of his book by regurgitating Steven Pinker, to demonstrate that human nature exists, and that it is tribal and mostly unpleasant, as shown by that we tend to kill each other, and primitive man killed at a massive rate. His point seems to be that if we don’t cling tightly to the Miracle of liberal democracy, we’ll all immediately start killing each other with spears in dawn raids. For the limited point that human nature exists, Pinker is correct enough, but since Goldberg is a huge Pinker fanboy, he immediately slides from this relatively narrow point into lecturing us that bad people are leading a “rebellion against the unnatural nature of the Enlightenment and all of the Enlightenment’s offspring: capitalism, democracy, natural rights, and science.” This claim of the Enlightenment being the source of everything good in the modern world, of course, a constant and ludicrous trope of Pinker, which I already dissected and

refuted in my review of Pinker's most recent book, so I will not repeat that demolition here, though at least Pinker writes clearly and precisely. Goldberg is trying (I think) to establish that if anyone dares attack the Enlightenment, or claims that the West made any moral progress prior to the Enlightenment, that person must want us to go back to the torture practices of the Aztecs and the Assyrians, which he narrates in great detail in case we miss the point, footnoting mostly to Pinker. Then Goldberg solemnly tells us, "But few societies put more time, energy, and ingenuity into the practice [of torture] than medieval Europeans." His evidence for this? Nothing, which is not surprising, considering it's wholly untrue, since the use of torture by medieval Europeans has been exaggerated for propaganda purposes for centuries—something of which Goldberg seems unaware, because he (like his hero, Pinker) seems to know zero history other than that history "everybody knows," mostly gleaned from surfing the Internet.

On and on the silliness goes. Thus, we are told, with a straight face, that "Slavery was destroyed by capitalism." For this bold and radical claim, which ignores the social movements (found only in Christianity) that actually destroyed slavery, as well as many other sophisticated (and unsophisticated) arguments about the interplay of capitalism and slavery, along with the inconvenient fact that slavery existed in the West long after the Enlightenment was in full flower and without real objection from its leading lights, we are directed to a blog post at "Cafe Hayek." That ten-line, 2009 post states that "Slavery and capitalism are opposites." For proof, or rather to "challenge the notion that slavery is or ever was essential to capitalism" (not the same claim at all, and in fact there are three distinct claims about slavery now being made) a link to a 2005 column is provided. That link is dead. Oh well—I guess we will remain in the dark. Then Goldberg tells us that "we needed a war to end the institution." Huh? I thought capitalism destroyed it. Then we are told that "the very notion that humans can sell their services or labor in a free market is a remarkably recent idea," which would have been news to the medieval artisan and the ancient Greek farmer. We are also told that "the child of a [Roman] slave did not inherit that status," which is flatly untrue. And that's about the level of facts, reasoning and backup that is found throughout the book. Your mileage will not vary.

This ends Part I. Next, in Part II, Goldberg steps back to give us his not-very-deep thoughts, in separate chapters, on "the State," Capitalism, Reason, and the "American Miracle." As far as the State, we get a second Cliff Notes version of the Enlightenment, in which John Locke is again the only person who matters and all other political thinkers of the time, not to mention modern thinkers, are ignored. And, certainly, anybody who sees any value to pre-Enlightenment societies, from James C. Scott to Christian integralists, or who sees any problem with liberal democracy or the ever-expanding sphere of unhinged personal autonomy and emancipation from non-chosen ties that is the Enlightenment's real gift to us, from Ryszard Legutko to Patrick Deneen, does not appear. Offerings are burnt at the altar of the supposed social contract. Much rambling about Hammurabi, Gregory VII and Henry IV, and chaotic discussion about monarchy, aristocracy and father figures, ensues. We are then abruptly offered a cheesy conclusion about the State, which has little to do with what preceded it: "[E]very effort to do away with liberal democratic capitalism is reactionary, because they all attempt to restore the unity of purpose that defines the premodern or tribal mind." Leaving aside the breathtaking hubris, bad history, and total falsehood of this claim, it illustrates Goldberg's main method of "analysis," which is repeating his pre-baked conclusion at random places, hoping it becomes ever more fixed in the reader's mind.

Then the focus turns to Capitalism, where the talk is again mostly about modern prosperity, and again ignores competing theories about the Great Divergence, and also ignores that it indisputably began long before the Enlightenment. We are treated to endless confusion, along with near-continuous channeling of Deirdre McCloskey, of whom Goldberg is also a fanboy, as he is of the amazingly stupid Matt Ridley. I know a great deal about this topic, and I cannot fathom most of what Goldberg says, since it is incoherent, but it apparently revolves around claims that until the Enlightenment, for both Catholics and Protestants, we had no progress, because "Notions of betterment, innovation, and improvement were seen, literally, as heresy. . . . [C]uriosity was a sin, and the innovator [was] a heretic." Thus capitalism, which is undefined, but is also the Miracle, and also the Enlightenment, created the Scientific Revolution, of which Thomas Edison was a part. To narrate these claims is to refute them.

Grinding on, Reason began with John Locke, whose only opposition was Rousseau, who was a romantic and a reactionary, which are the same thing. Rousseau's descendants still fight reason with ignorance, though (and presumably want to torture everyone). Then the American Founders channeled Locke, giving us the best government ever (although, of course, every time he mentions something good about the Founding, Goldberg also hastily offers pre-emptive apologies for everything bad of the time, such as slavery and the supposed bad treatment of women, since he does not want to become persona non grata on the DC and New York cocktail party circuits). James Madison invented separation of powers out of whole cloth, in an improvement on Locke. (The names Polybius and Montesquieu do not appear.) Thus, we got the "American Miracle," which bears an undefined relationship to the "Miracle," but must be good, given its name.

Goldberg again and again tells us variations on that any deviation from the "liberal order of the Miracle" are both "fundamentally romantic" and "reactionary." Those are not compliments. By "romantic," he seems to mean in the Rousseau and Goethe sense, and by "reactionary" he means "a return to some form of tribal solidarity where we're all in it together." Again with the pre-baked, and ludicrous conclusions; the basic contention seems to be that the hive mind was everyone's goal until 1750. For Goldberg, with no exceptions, all political ideas since the Enlightenment that are not the Enlightenment are both romantic and reactionary. Communism? Yup. Nazism? Yup. Bernie Sanders? Yup. Trump? Yup. Environmentalism? Yup. To accomplish this neat division, he seems to define "romantic" as "any of the stupid illogic that disagrees with John Locke." And he defines "reactionary" not with its proper meaning, the creation of a new political order by reference, at least in part, to the past, but with the puerile and simplistic meaning of "wholesale return to some imagined Golden Age"—that of forced unity, or the Borg, or something. In other words, he creates imaginary meanings and then uses those meanings to shunt all other political analysis into a siding, in which he can ignore it. This, if one can be chosen, is the besetting failure of this book. It refuses in any way to engage with the thinking of anyone else. Not for Goldberg a grappling with those many modern conservative thinkers who reject the Enlightenment in whole or in part. Not for Goldberg a grappling with the struggles of Americans living under "liberalism" and "capitalism" that led to the rise of Trump. Not for Goldberg any attempt to see why progressives think what they think. No, all of them are simply knuckle-dragging tribalists, eager to destroy the Miracle and cast us all into the pit.

Then the reader is frog-marched through Part III. We are told how aristocracies are natural, and because they are always bad, they are always trying to destroy the Miracle, for which claim a thumbnail history of Venice is offered. Following we get a long (but good) explanation of the Progressive Era, summarizing Goldberg's earlier Liberal Fascism. Then the administrative state, which is a form of elitist aristocracy, and therefore a form of anti-Miracle "corruption," cribbed (with attribution, as always) from Charles Murray and Philip Hamburger. Then a screed on "Tribalism Today," which you would think would focus on white nationalists or some other undesirables, but mostly talks about leftist identity politics. We get bonus stupidity, though, such as the claim that "the struggle for gay marriage [succeeded] because it appealed not to radicalism but to bourgeois values about family formation." And, on a more personal note, Goldberg talks glowingly of Hungarians escaping from Communism in 1956 as saying they are going to America, not because they were forced into exile by the evils of Communism, but "Because, son, we were born Americans, but in the wrong place," which, as the child of a Hungarian refugee from Communism, I find offensive and disloyal, and not likely something a real Hungarian would say. Finally, though, we do get a nod to the problem that identity politics on the Left may create the same on the Right, immediately followed by the claim that economic protectionism of any sort is a manifestation of tribalism.

To end the book, we get a chapter on "The Trumpian Era," which does touch on Trump (highly negatively), but is mostly an attempt to draw a magic circle around "democracy" and to claim that no democracy, no Miracle. Not that any evidence for this is offered, except pointing out that much the world is still crappy, and most of the world is not democratic, so it must be that crappiness is caused by lack of democracy. We also get snark about Michael Anton. (On a side note, Goldberg claims Anton is a "multimillionaire hedge fund partner," a claim he has repeated, if you search the internet. I had never heard that, so I went hunting. The only job Anton has had that meets that description is "Managing Director" of BlackRock, from October 2015

to February 2017. According to his federal financial disclosure forms, he was paid a base of \$200K a year by BlackRock, and got a bonus of \$150K one year and \$170K in the second year. Those are pittance by New York hedge fund standards. There is no indication of any ownership or partnership status, and no assets other than retirement accounts, plus a bank account with around \$100K. I conclude Goldberg is spreading a falsehood, though I suppose it's hardly a slur to say a man is rich.) And we get the cliché-named chapter "Things Fall Apart," saying that because, as Charles Murray has demonstrated, the family has fallen apart, and Trump is a jerk, the flood-tide of tribalism is about to sweep over us all.

None of this is even remotely convincing, even if some of the facts adduced are not totally wrong. One problem, I realized after getting to the end, is that Goldberg just can't write. Page after page bounces around from idea to idea, usually roughly related to whatever the basic focus of the chapter is, but rarely tied together in any coherent way. Ideas bleed from chapter to chapter, uncertain where their home is. It does not help that typos abound (Phil Gramm is introduced in one sentence, and called "Graham" in the next), and that the book features a total lack of consistency as to the generic pronoun (sometimes "they," sometimes "he" or "her"). And even Goldberg's attempts to show his pop culture chops backfire—he talks constantly about Game of Thrones, the nihilistic fantasy TV series, such as quoting a character, the "Mountain," as saying "a man has to have a code." But it is not the Mountain, Gregor Clegane, who says that. It is his brother, Sandor Clegane, the "Hound," and this is an bush-league error, since the brothers are utterly different characters and hate each other. The Mountain only says a few words and is quickly killed and turned into a zombie, while the Hound is a cynical motor mouth with a heart of gold. These are small problems (if irritating), compared to the rambling of the book, which could be boiled down to a short and punchy (if mostly wrong) pamphlet by a competent writer (like me). (And if I were constructing a counter-argument to that pamphlet, I would demonstrate that, in the material realm, the Enlightenment, a movement of political ideas, had nothing to do with the creation of the modern world; and that in the political realm, there are many, and probably better, alternatives to the pass that the Enlightenment has led us, none of which involve tribalism or barbarism, or, for that matter, rot and putrefaction. Another day, perhaps.)

[Review finishes as first comment.]

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## **Carol Storm says**

The chapter on Trump deserves Five Stars, and then some. Jonah not only nails all of Trump's bizarre obsessions and character flaws, which are too well-known to be enumerated here, but provides a brilliant analysis of how the Republican party fell apart and why the Conservative movement was unable to resist him.

The rest of the book is barely worth one star. There's all the usual Goldberg filler -- cheap shots at Franklin Roosevelt, horror stories about the French Revolution, condescending pop-culture references, amateur anthropology, forced attempts at humor and hipness -- and on top of that the most obsequious, nauseating sentimentality about powerful institutions like the Catholic Church.

Two moments stuck out for me as being especially creepy. The first was very early on, where Jonah breaks from an extended tribute to the glorious Founding Fathers, including "Honest" Abe Lincoln and George "I Cannot Tell A Lie" Washington, and delivers a stirring defense of the value of . . . hypocrisy. That's right, hypocrisy. Just like dear old David Brooks in that other oily conservative masterpiece, "The Road To Character."

What is it with Conservatives and hypocrisy? I read this whole book trying to figure it out. Finally I noticed that Jonah made some stupid, off-hand remark about "not liking crowds" and feeling very suspicious of

demagogues and the mob. That means Trump, I suppose, and his supporters. But it also means anyone who doesn't accept the authority of "the elites." It means people who serve in the military instead of going to college. And the funny thing is, Jonah Goldberg's understanding of who the elites really are and why they deserve their position isn't really all that different from Katha Pollitt's or Anna Quindlen's. His cultural tastes and labored scholarship make it clear that he's loyal to his class over his party, and that it's only privileged, college educated people he takes seriously. Deep down Jonah doesn't like or respect working-class people, and that's why he hates the idea of populism so much.

What makes Jonah different from people like Anna Quindlen or Katha Pollitt is that unlike them, he understands that his position depends on the sacrifice of people beneath him on the social scale. In order to keep what he has, he has to continually praise people he has no intention of ever imitating -- combat soldiers above all, of course, but also cops, firemen, teachers, and so on. He has to pretend he's on their side when he really doesn't care what happens to them one way or the other. It's the only way to keep us working. And that's where the virtue of hypocrisy comes in!

Speaking of combat soldiers, it's very interesting that in his entire analysis of why millions of angry, embittered, poor whites endorsed Trump, there's no mention of either the Iraq War or the still ongoing war in Afghanistan. Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years of war, and no end in sight. Jonah has all day long to talk about the Reign of Terror and what it did to France, and the tragic suffering of the aristocrats and priests who got dragged to the guillotine, but he can't spend five paragraphs on the human suffering of disabled veterans and their families. Did they feel betrayed by Bush? By Obama? By you? Our boy doesn't care. But they're still out there, Jonah, and they vote!

The other moment that creeped me out was when Jonah suddenly started grooving on how much he loves *THE EXORCIST*, a really disgusting and violent horror movie from back around 1973. This whole movie is about how a preteen girl gets possessed by the Devil, and she starts talking dirty and spitting up, and a couple of celibate male Catholic priests have to moan and chant and sprinkle Holy Water all over her dirty sinful female body, and then finally the righteous male priests beat hell out of her with their fists and the Devil goes away. Jonah evidently thinks this is what civilization is all about -- virtuous men making war against the beastliness of human nature. What I think the movie is about is hatred of the human body, fear of female sexuality, and the connection between repression and sadism. Jonah's a smart boy but he would have been better off riffing on *THE GODFATHER* -- because the 2016 election was just like the famous final scene where Michael's goons close the door in Kay's face.

But at least that was a halfway decent movie!

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## **Sam Reaves says**

Not to be confused with James Burnham's 1964 book of the same title (or for that matter with Oswald Spengler's reactionary screed from 1918, *The Decline of the West*), this is a defense of classical liberalism by a contemporary conservative who is appalled by the rise of Donald Trump but sees him as a symptom of a larger problem, namely the erosion of the classical liberal values on which the unprecedented rise of Western Europe (and its extension North America) is built. Goldberg calls this rise out of millennial poverty into prosperous modernity "the Miracle", because he says the things that propelled it are contrary to human nature and coalesced in a corner of Europe more or less by accident. These include the ideas of natural rights, the rule of law, limited government, and so on. These are liberal values in the classical sense, the values of the Enlightenment, and Goldberg says that all of them go against our natural human tendency to band together into tribes and war with other tribes. He sees the current world-wide swing back toward authoritarian nationalism as a return to our natural instincts, and it scares him. He stresses that there's nothing inevitable

about tolerant, open, democratic societies; they require constant maintenance and ideological confidence. Notwithstanding a few digs on Goldberg's part at contemporary liberalism (as opposed to the classical sort), there is much we can all agree on here. If you are a plain old liberal rather than a classical liberal, you may frown in a few places, but be grateful: here's a conservative calling out the malign nature of Trumpism. It would be nice if there were more of them.

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## Rachel says

I didn't technically finish, but I reached the library due date and couldn't renew. So when I get it back, I'm on chapter 10.

You are familiar with the story of the goose that laid the golden egg. There are two versions of this story. In the first, (French, I think), the farmer and his wife decide that the goose must have a lump of gold inside it, and decide to kill the goose and get the gold all at once. In the second, the farmer -getting one golden egg a day- demands two. When the goose says "Sorry, I can only do the one," the farmer kills the goose in a fit of rage. Either way, the slaughtered goose is no different from the mundane goose, and the golden eggs go away.

This has been taught as an indictment of greed. It should be seen as an indictment of ingratitude. If I had a goose providing golden eggs, I should do anything in my power to preserve that goose and support its egg production. This is the premise of this book. We have a goose that has been providing golden eggs, and we are in danger of destroying it through rage/"reason"/ingratitude.

For the purposes of this book, there is no God. There is no teleology (the doctrine of design and purpose in the material world), no "right side of history," no *intent* behind things being the way they are today. They just are.

With that in mind, we are living in an unnatural state. Democracy, capitalism, human rights, these are all unnatural states of affairs for humanity. For 200,000 years of what could be called human history, the story of man is "grinding poverty, punctuated by horrific violence, culminating in premature death." For the vast majority of human history, man has lived on \$1-3 dollars a day.

The coordination of man's efforts into groups has been limited to tribes: primarily family/friend groups, but basically it's "us" vs "them." Different foundations have been laid to assign people to different categories: family bond, race, geography, religion, state, etc etc. Generally, we help those in our group, and avoid/fight/contend with those outside the group. Nations and religions encourage us to expand our concept of "us" beyond just that family/friend group, with varying degrees of success.

Government/state has existed as no more than a form of institutionalized criminality, with a powerful few at the top directing the lives and means of others to their benefit.

300 years ago, the Miracle happened. John Locke proposed the concept that men are naturally free and equal before God, not inherently subject to a King/equivalent. And then it was codified in the United States in the US Constitution. Today, there is unprecedented global prosperity. (This doesn't mean UNIVERSAL prosperity - there are always divides between the top and the bottom.)

Opposing John Locke is Rousseau: that the interests of the individual man are inferior to the interests of social man/society. That it is the duty of Society to direct the interests and activities to produce a higher, healthier Society. It's also informed by Romanticism, which is the idea that "things aren't great, they could be

so much better, and if they aren't, it's because someone is screwing it up and cheating other people, and we have to fix it."

Jonah Goldberg is positing that the Miracle is threatened by the return to tribalism. Free markets encourage us to look outside of our tribal interests. I may not like (pick a group), but if I want them to buy my products/sell me things, I'll look beyond it. Tribalism is about my group: making it bigger, stronger, better, and never mind the other groups/tribes.

The book has certainly gotten me thinking, including about the tribes that I've been slotting myself into, and how I can expand that wider so that I perceive fewer enemies. Still - I agree: the Miracle is at risk.

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### **Willy Marz Thiessam says**

Jonah Goldberg justifies inequality and a myriad of global problems as the price for Freedom, as if it existed as an absolute, almost like an object with physical dimensions and qualities. The object of freedom is to make a commitment in one way or the other. The massive inequality that Goldberg justifies minuses out any aspect of change. Capital and its accumulation above every other consideration is not about stuff or maintaining the ability to maintain "freedom", its about power commoditized and numerical which only has meaning in relation to the interests of the other holders of capital. And what is that interest, the control of price and the market. That society creates the space for this struggle to take place is of course something Neo-liberals barely understand, its not merely the existence of night-watchmen, monetary policy and prisons that make "capitalism" possible. The advantages Goldberg accrues to Capitalism were derived from a mixed economy where control of the business enterprise was as essential to ensuring those in positions of power would remain in power as it did secure the needs of society as a whole.

Goldberg would do well to remember the maxim of Machiavelli when he pointed out that men are always ready to overthrow their masters. Its transplanting it with something that works that is the rarity. The Neo-liberal Revolution is over and it was never the sweet words and complex ideology of policy wonks such as Goldberg that made that revolution possible. The world gave it a try and found it wanting, the age is over, the magic incantation of Neo-liberal mantras about freedom have come to an end. Goldberg seems intelligent so I'm sure he can come up with something new that might find a receptive audience, this however is not it.

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### **David Huff says**

If by chance you weren't aware that Jonah Goldberg is not exactly a Donald Trump fan, you will discover the magnitude of his disdain for the President in the latter chapters of this book. However, don't let that cause you to burn the author in effigy, or pass out from excessive glee, whichever may apply to you. This book is a broad, well-researched survey of centuries of history, emphasizing how unlikely it was that any nation would ever enjoy the freedoms, rule of law, free market economy, and other blessings of liberty that have been the American experience.

Goldberg pointed out, on several occasions, that the original manuscript of *Suicide of the West* was twice the size of the final published version. That's a staggering thought, because I found this book to be lavishly rich (occasionally distractingly so) in historical details, covering a multitude of topics at length, with a rabbit trail here and there. The current enemies, in Goldberg's eyes, of the "miracle" of capitalism and democracy enjoyed in American and the western world, are summarized in the title: tribalism, populism, nationalism,

and identity politics. He goes to great lengths to provide historical background and connections to help the reader understand how, in his view, these four sub-topics have become so dangerous to freedom and democracy.

This quote from the book is a good summary of his thesis:

“Capitalism is unnatural.

Democracy is unnatural.

Human rights are unnatural.

The world we live in today is unnatural, and we stumble into it more or less by accident.

The natural state of mankind is grinding poverty punctuated by horrific violence terminating with an early death.

It was like this for a very very long time.”

Whatever your view of his politics may be, I very much think Jonah Goldberg’s “Suicide of the West” is worth reading. You will gain considerable insight into history, politics, economics, culture, and much more, and will have a renewed appreciation for the “miracle” that he writes about so well.

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