INTRODUCTION

> [W]e have now sunk to a depth at which the restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men.
>
> —George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*

The Cowardice of Clichés

According to legend, when George Will signed up to become a syndicated columnist in the 1970s, he asked his friend William F. Buckley, Jr.—the founder of *National Review* and a columnist himself—"How will I ever write two columns a week?" Buckley responded (I'm paraphrasing), "Oh it will be easy. At least two things a week will annoy you, and you'll write about them."

Buckley was right. Annoyance is an inspiration, aggravation a muse. That which gets your blood up, also gets the ink—or these days, pixels—flowing. Show me an author without passion for what he holds to be the truth and I will show you either a boring writer or someone who misses a lot of deadlines, or both. Nothing writes itself, and what gets the writer to push that boulder uphill is more often than not irritation with those saying wrong things righteously.

Which brings me to this book. There's a kind of argument-that-isn't-an-argument that vexes me. I first started to notice it on university campuses. I've spoken to a lot of college audiences. Often, I will encounter an earnest student, much more serious looking than the typical hippie with open-toed shoes and a closed mind. During the Q&A session after my

speech he will say something like "Mr. Goldberg, I may disagree with what you have to say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

Then he will sit down, and the audience will applaud. Faculty will nod proudly at this wiser-than-his-years hatchling under their wings. What a glorious moment for everybody. Blessed are the bridge builders.

My response? Who gives a rat's ass?

First of all, my right to speak never was in doubt. Indeed, I'm usually *paid* to speak. Besides, I've given my speech already and we're in Q&A time: Shouldn't you have told me this beforehand? Second, the kid is almost surely lying. He'll take a bullet for me? *Really?*

Clichés like these are a way to earn bravery on the cheap, defending principles you haven't thought through or perhaps only vaguely support. Or, heck, maybe he really would leap on a grenade so I could finish talking about how stupid high-speed rail is. But it still doesn't matter, because mouthing these sorts of clichés is *a way to avoid arguments, not make them.* Imagine a defendant is on the stand. The prosecutor peppers the accused murderer with questions: "Is this your chain saw?" "Where were you on the night of the fourteenth?" "How can you explain the victim's foot being in your freezer?"

Now imagine the defendant responds, "Sir, I may disagree with your line of questioning, but I will defend to the death your right to ask me these things."

The prosecutor, if he's not a complete idiot, will say, "Stop trying to change the subject and answer my questions."

One last point about "I may disagree with you but I'll defend to the death your right to say it": The implication is not only that the person saying this is brave but also that we live in a society where such bravery might be required. It suggests that speech is so imperiled that bloodshed may be called for. Many people think that's how the phrase was born, that they're echoing the heroism of some forgotten general or martyr willing to sacrifice himself for the liberty of others. But they're wrong.

The phrase is usually attributed to Voltaire, though he didn't say it. It was a historian's paraphrasing of Voltaire's attitude, written more than a century after Voltaire's death. And even his attitude wasn't all that sincere. According to S. G. Tallentyre's *The Friends of Voltaire*, the quote traces itself back to a hullaballoo over a book by the French utilitarian

philosopher Claude Adrien Helvétius. The book, *De l'Espirit*, argued that people behave the way they do out of a desire to avoid pain or feel pleasure. Or something. Regardless, everyone hated the book, including Voltaire (who took offense at what he considered to be the author's insufficient praise of him). *De l'Espirit* was essentially ignored until the dauphin, the king's son, read it. He *really* hated it. Parliament ended up banning it. The tome was even publicly burned. Like a 1920s book that could catapult its sales by being BANNED IN BOSTON!, *De l'Espirit* became a sensation, translated into every language imaginable, precisely because it had been censored. And, just as suddenly, Helvétius became a celebrity, his salon instantly fashionable.

"What the book could never have done for itself, or for its author, persecution did for them both," writes Tallentyre.

> The men who had hated it, and had not particularly loved Helvétius, flocked round him now. Voltaire forgave him all injuries, intentional or unintentional. "What a fuss about an omelette!" [Voltaire] had exclaimed when he heard of the burning. How abominably unjust to persecute a man for such an airy trifle as that! "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it," was his attitude now.[1]

So it is an expression born in glibness—defined by vanity, not courage—and it remains so to this day.

This is only one example of the problem. I started to notice that the same thing happens in writing, on TV, in books; people invoke these clichés as placeholders for arguments not won, ideas not fully understood. At the same time, the same sorts of people cavalierly denounce far more thought-out positions because they're too "ideological." Indeed, in America, we train people to be skeptical of ideology. College students in particular are quick to object with a certain gotcha tone: "That sounds like an ideological statement."

Such skepticism doesn't bother me. Indeed, I encourage it. The problem is that while our radar is great at spotting in-bound ideological statements, clichés sail right through. People will say "It is better that ten men go free than one innocent man go to jail" and *then stop talking*, as if

they've made an argument simply by saying that. They will take the slippery slope at face value. They'll say "Diversity is strength," as if it means something, and "Violence never solved anything," as if that were not only plausible but so true that no further explication is required.

"We are only as free as the least free among us" they'll proclaim, misquoting Martin Luther King, Jr., or Elie Wiesel, or was it Captain Jean-Luc Picard? But of course, this isn't even remotely true. It is a very nice thing to say. It's a noble thing to try to live by. But it's in no meaningful sense true. Rather, it is the sort of thing people assert in the hopes that it will win them uncontested ground in an argument.

Sometimes the problem is simply lazy thinking. But in other cases the lazy thinking merely creates the vulnerability for radical thinking. Some incredibly ideological ideas simply ride into your head like the dream spelunkers in the movie *Inception*—setting up, working their way through your programming—all because they're wrapped in the protective coating of clichés.

One Man's Terrorist Is Another Man's Freedom Fighter

Consider "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." This is surely true if the other man is a terrorist sympathizer—or an idiot. Otherwise the expression is simply pithy hogwash.

It's difficult to think of a cliché that more baldly disqualifies ostensibly intelligent people from the pretense of moral or intellectual seriousness. It is simply absurd to contend that because people may argue over who is or is not a terrorist that it is therefore impossible to make meaningful distinctions between terrorists and freedom fighters. The reasoning behind the expression, which entered the discourse in the late 1970s and was inadvertently popularized by Ronald Reagan in 1986 (he rejected it completely, of course) is the sort of thing that would make any good Jesuit weep. It steamrolls through a fallacious comparison, confusing ends and means on its way, in order to celebrate both relativism and nihilism and elevate moral cowardice as an intellectual principle.

First of all, one could certainly argue that terrorists and freedom fighters need not be opposites. Freedom fighters can also be terrorists and vice versa (the abolitionist John Brown comes to mind as someone who may have been both). Certainly, fighting for freedom does not absolve you from the crime of terrorism, anymore than blowing up a pizza parlor automatically means you're fighting *for* freedom. To suggest otherwise is to say that a freedom fighter is morally immune to condemnation for his actions. Surely there are freedom fighters who reject terrorism and hence deserve our praise. Shall we say George Washington, Martin Luther King, and Mohandas Gandhi are indistinguishable from Osama bin Laden or Timothy McVeigh? Most reasonable and decent people would recoil at the suggestion that Martin Luther King was a terrorist (some liberals might interject at this point and say, "Aha, but some Southern racists said exactly that about King!," to which a sane person would respond, "Yes, and they were wrong to do so").

If one man pushes an old lady in front of an oncoming bus and another man pushes an old lady out of the way of an oncoming bus, to borrow Bill Buckley's famous puncturing of moral equivalence arguments, it will not suffice to say that they are both the sorts of men who push old ladies around. But this is precisely the sort of thing some people are up to when they say "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." Their notion of freedom fighter hinges on a slew of deeply ideological and dangerous positions that have been hidden away. What freedom is al Qaeda fighting for exactly? Hamas? The freedom to lock women away in burlap sacks, crush homosexuals, and throw acid in the faces of children?

Calling these murderers freedom fighters reminds me of G. K. Chesterton's line about how "the word 'good' has many meanings: For example, if a man were to shoot his grandmother at a range of five hundred yards, I should call him a good shot, but not necessarily a good man.'"[2]

The other people who use the phrase are simply frightened, either intellectually or physically. The news editor for the BBC says, "It is the style of the BBC World Service to call no one a terrorist, aware as we are that one man's terrorist is another one's freedom fighter." The global news editor for Reuters: "We all know that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter, and that Reuters upholds the principle that we do not use the word terrorist."

Some news organizations justify such policies on the grounds that they need to keep their reporters safe in parts of the world where, er, terrorists/freedom fighters hold sway. And so they refuse to call the men who slit the throats of children, blow up their local kebab stands, and the

like "terrorists." That might sound, if not exactly brave (no "defending to the death" reporters' rights to tell the truth here, you will notice), then at least reasonable. But when terrorists attacked the London subway, suddenly these same organizations saw nothing wrong with calling terrorists what they are.

Again, if you want to call members of Hamas freedom fighters, be my guest. We'll have an argument about it. What really offends is a morally obtuse, radically ideological phrase being bandied around as a way not to start an argument but to close one off. "Oh, let's not argue about Israel. Besides, we all know one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." It's a way of getting in your cheap shot just before the bell.

The Center

Other clichés aren't so much pithy phrases used in everyday debate. They're shorthand concepts, clichéd ways of thinking massaged into the way we see the world. Ideological marketers, such as Republican focus group maven Frank Luntz or Berkeley linguist George Lakoff, are paid huge sums of money to invent new buzzwords and phrases that are a fraction as successful as some of these ancient clichés. People at least understand that Luntz's phrase "death tax" has some political and ideological salesmanship to it. I'm writing about many of the clichés and concepts that are more central to how we think about politics, in part because we take them as apolitical and mainstream.

How central are they to our thinking? Well, how about the word "center"? First of all, you do realize that whenever we talk about "the center" in politics it's entirely metaphorical, right? There is no way to actually take the geographic concept of centrality and apply it literally to, say, abortion, or gay rights, or gun control. There's a certain Goldilocks bias to discussions of politics: If Papa Bear's porridge is too hot and Mama Bear's is too cold, then Baby Bear's is always just right. It must work the same way in politics, right? Centrists, moderates, middle-of-the-roaders, independents: They all suffer from variants of this confusion. The "extreme" Republicans argue ten. The "extreme" Democrats argue for zero. Therefore the smart, sensible, reasonable position must be five.

Well, the Wahhabis want to kill all the gays and Jews. The Sufis don't want to kill any gays or Jews. So the moderate, sensible position

must be to kill just the gays, but not the Jews. Or maybe the other way around? Or half of all the gays and Jews? Or maybe all the gay Jews? Or maybe we can have a very complicated compromise along the lines of last year's debt-ceiling negotiations, where a small percentage of Jews are killed now and we kill a larger number of gays in the out years?

The point is that sometimes the extreme is 100 percent correct while the centrist position is 100 percent wrong. But there's something about being not as wrong as one of the other extremes that some people just find so enticing and seductive. I just don't get it.

If I say we need one hundred feet of bridge to cross a one-hundred-foot chasm that makes me an extremist. Somebody else says we don't need to build a bridge at all because we don't need to cross the chasm in the first place. That makes him an extremist. The third guy is the centrist because he insists that we compromise by building a fifty-foot bridge that ends in the middle of thin air? As an extremist I'll tell you that the other extremist has a much better grasp on reality than the centrist does. The extremists have a serious disagreement about what to do. The independent who splits the difference has no idea what to do and doesn't want to bother with figuring it out.

And yet we hear constantly how independents who borrow a little from this side and borrow a little from that side are somehow more politically sophisticated and mature than the straight-line thinkers of the left and the right. But here's the thing: The straight-line thinkers tend to think in a straight line not because they are hidebound and close-minded and clinging to an ideological agenda. They tend to think in a reasonably straight line because they've worked out a reasonably consistent way of seeing the world. The independents and moderates who just grab stuff from this shelf, then from that shelf, like a panicked survivor of the dawn of the dead grabbing what he or she can from the supermarket before the zombies spot her, do not value consistency at all.

The self-appointed guardians of this notion that the center is also the high ground can mostly be found in the press corps, because it validates their own self-conception. They honestly believe they are neither left nor right, and so they value the politicians and voters who share this political ambivalence.

More critical, this nonsense survives because our politics are ar-

ranged so as to ensure it. When a country is evenly divided ideologically, it's unavoidable that those who split the differences will get outsized power, because they are the ones who will ultimately decide elections. That's why every general election that begins with "securing the base" ends with the presidential candidates begging for support from centrists, independents, moderates, and the folks who really put the *asses* in masses: the Undecideds. Every four years after each presidential debate we are forced to listen to interviews with undecided voters who not only can't see major differences between the political candidates (which, by that point in the campaign, means they've not been paying attention), but who also think the reason we have presidential debates is to give tutorials on policy minutiae: "I didn't hear enough about what they would do about education." "I wanted more specifics about what [So-and-so] would do for someone like me." Meanwhile, back in their election headquarters the anchors nod along as if this reaction is damning of the candidates' performances.

After an eighteen-month campaign, all of the informed, conscious, and ideologically consistent voters have already made up their minds. All that's left are the undecided centrists, who actually think they have the more sophisticated and serious position; their indecision comes, actually, by virtue of the fact they've either not paid much attention until way too late in the game, or more simply, they're a**holes who think they must be at the center of the universe.

Now, hold on, I mean that in a fairly literal way. Let me explain.

The notion that the center is a place of privilege and esteem has a very long pedigree, with a somewhat anti-Catholic bias. For instance, you may have heard that Galileo dealt the Western, Christian mind a devastating blow when he confirmed that Copernicus was right. The Earth revolves around the Sun and the Sun is at the center of the solar system (i.e., heliocentrism). John Bargh, a scientist at Yale, says in David Brooks's *The Social Animal* that Galileo "removed the Earth from its privileged position at the center of the universe." The *Britannica Concise Encyclopedia* tells us that the "[d]ethronement of Earth from the center of the universe caused profound shock." The less reliable but more relied upon Wikipedia agrees: "[T]he transition between these two theories met much resistance, not only from the Catholic Church, which was reluctant to accept

a theory not placing God's creation at the center of the universe, but also from those who saw geocentrism as a fact that could not be subverted by a new, weakly justified theory." Get that? The Church opposed heliocentrism because it couldn't handle man's "dethronement" from the center of the universe; meanwhile, other, more sensible, opponents objected because they thought the science was weak. Inconceivable that the Church might have thought the science was weak, too.

This history has it exactly backward. The Church did not consider the "center of the universe" to be a place of privilege. That is a modern conceit. Before Copernicus the consensus among Western scientists and theologians was, in accordance with Aristotle, that the Earth was either at, or was, the anal aperture of the universe, literally.

In 1486, Giovanni Pico, a leading philosopher of the Italian Renaissance, penned his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, commonly referred to as the manifesto of the Italian Renaissance. In it he observed that the Earth resided in "the excremetary and filthy parts of the lower world." Two centuries earlier, Thomas Aquinas concluded that "in the universe, the earth—that all the spheres encircle and that, as for place, lies in the center—is the most material and coarsest of all bodies." In Dante's *Inferno*, the lowest pit of Hell is at the exact center of the planet, which historian Dennis R. Danielson describes as the "dead center of the whole universe."[3]

Pre-Copernican cosmology, in short, didn't see the center of the universe as a place of privilege and esteem but as a lowly, dirty, filthy place. Think of it this way: The modern mind thinks in latitudes, left and right, forward and backward. The medieval mind saw things in terms of up and down. Aristotle observed that the heavier and coarser things tended to accumulate at the bottom, or center. As in the human body, the bowels and viscera are at the center. As you move up you reach the noble organ, the heart. And the mind resides at the top. The celestial heavens and stars were *above*. Humanity was *below*, in the coarse center. This was not simply or solely a Christian view. Moses Maimonides, the greatest of medieval Jewish philosophers, insisted that "in the case of the Universe . . . the nearer the parts are to the center, the greater is their turbidness, their solidity, their inertness, their dimness and darkness, because they are further away from the loftiest element, from the source of light and brightness."

Dennis R. Danielson, who has tracked the history of this myth, suggests that it begins with the seventeenth-century dramatist Cyrano de Bergerac. He claimed that pre-Copernican geocentrism was a testament to "the insupportable arrogance of Mankinde, which fancies, [*sic*] that Nature was only created to serve it." In 1686, the French writer Bernard le Bouvier de Fontenelle hailed Copernicus for taking the Earth and throwing it "out of the center of the World." According to de Fontenelle, Copernicus sought to "abate the Vanity of men who had thrust themselves into the chief place of the Universe."[4]

It took a long time to make a scientifically persuasive case that the Earth isn't the center of the universe and that it revolves around the Sun. If you can't sympathize with that, please stop referring to the rising and setting of the sun across our sky, since we are the ones moving, not it. The theological reason men stuck with the old scientific paradigm had nothing to do with arrogance and everything to do with humility.

And there's the rub. The real arrogance here is on the part of those who see the past as populated with unsophisticated bumpkins, as if ignorance of scientific truth is the same thing as stupidity. But if in fifty years it's discovered that there's life on Mars, does that mean future generations can look at us today and legitimately say, "Look at those idiots, they didn't even know there was life on Mars"?

We find the same sort of bias in glib assertions about "flat-earthism." We've all heard about how Columbus proved to the skeptics that the world was round (the basis for one of my favorite Bugs Bunny cartoons). It's not true, as we will see in a moment. But first of all, is it really so crazy that people five hundred or a thousand years ago might have thought the world was flat? Really? Cut some slack for the people who lived without powerful telescopes, satellites, and the rest for at least considering this a somewhat open question. Anyway, it's simply not true that medieval Christianity taught that the world is flat. This myth, like many others discussed later in this book, stems from the biases of Protestant historians in the nineteenth century, who were eager to paint the Catholic Church as a giant wet blanket on scientific and human progress (see Chapter 21, The Catholic Church). Hence the myth that the Church tortured and imprisoned Galileo for his confirmation of Copernicus's findings. There's a legitimate question of whether he was in a jail cell for

three days—or not at all. But he certainly wasn't tortured. More important, the people who most ardently clamored for the Church to silence and punish Galileo were his jealous, lesser, scientific colleagues, not the theologians. When Galileo's heretical *Starry Messenger* was released, the Vatican threw a huge book party for him.[5]

"The principal truth to be drawn from the Galileo story is less dramatic than is the myth," Robert Nisbet wrote in his 1983 masterpiece *Prejudices: A Philosophical Dictionary*,

> but far more in accord with the emotions and institutional conditions that prevail today much as they did in the sixteenth century. Rivalry, jealousy, and vindictiveness from other scientists and philosophers were Galileo's lot, and they are not infrequently the lot of unorthodox minds in modern times. Anyone who believes that inquisitions went out with the triumph of secularism over religion has not paid attention to the records of foundations, federal research agencies, professional societies, and academic institutions and departments.[6]

In a similar vein, the legend that Giordorno Bruno was the "first martyr to science" is a myth as well. Bruno met with quite an ugly end, but it was not because of his scientific work; it was because he was an unrepentant theological heretic who denied the virgin birth and thought Jesus was a clever magician. Neither Galileo nor Bruno nor any scientists were punished for what they believed about astronomy.[7]

Often, what we think are the facts of the past are in reality simply reflections of what we want to believe about the present.

Hindsight Is 20/20

How often do we hear people say we must "get on the right side of history," as if they know their own history? "When they say it, what do people mean?" asks my *National Review* colleague Jay Nordlinger.

They may mean "my side," or "the good side," or "the side that posterity will smile on." People may be alluding to the ultimate triumph of liberal democracy. Or they may be alluding to the ultimate triumph of socialism, or a stricter form of collectivism. For generations, the Left has

assumed that history marches with them: Get out of the way, or be crushed.

The phrase has what British historian Robert Conquest calls a "Marxist twang." The Marxists believed that history was predictable and unidirectional, so of course there must be a right side and a wrong side to it. The candle makers were on the wrong side, the lightbulb makers the right side. But history doesn't work like that. There were times when it was obvious that technology aided tyrants and there have been times—much like our own—when it seemed equally obvious that technology must liberate the individual. The truth is, it must do neither. As Richard Pipes tells Nordlinger, "The whole notion is nonsensical." To which Nordlinger adds, "History does not have sides, although historians do."[8]

Marxism surely contributed to the idea that there's a right side to history, but the chief culprit is the arrogance of the present (Marxism, one could say, is a subspecies of this arrogance). We look back on the past and see it as prologue to our moment in time. History becomes a movie for which we know the ending and we think the characters of yesteryear are fools for not seeing it, too. Like the idiot teenager who declares, "I'll search the attic" in a horror movie, we marvel at the stupidity of earlier generations.

This assumption that the past is stupid and the present is wise too often binds the modern mind. It is a form of "Whiggish" history that assumes time proceeds in a steady, recognizable forward progression. Hence the nonsensical phrase "hindsight is 20/20." No it's not. Indeed, it's hard to think of a more untrue phrase casually flung about in intelligent conversation. If hindsight is 20/20, why do historians disagree about, well, just about everything after the date and place of an event? If we could see the past with perfect clarity, married couples wouldn't argue about who started the argument. Shi'a and Sunni would never have split. Jews would all be Christians or Christians would all be something else. Everyone would agree on who was the greatest boxer who ever lived and that Yoko Ono broke up the Beatles. Economists would stop saying "on the other hand."

The Whiggish assumption in contemporary politics that today must be better than yesterday, this year more advanced than last year, this century wiser than the one that preceded it is held most dogmatically by

so-called progressives. For them history is a vehicle with no reverse gear, and the engine that powers it is nothing more or less than the State. This is the hardened, metaphysical, dogmatic cliché that makes it possible for journalists to glibly describe any expansion of the government into our lives as a "step forward" or an "advancement" and any retrenchment of government as a step "backward." A Republican proposal of market-based reform always amounts to "turning back the clock." As discussed at length in a subsequent chapter, this is the core assumption behind the idea of the "living Constitution"—an idea that assumes with Hegelian orthodoxy that expansions of the State are the sine qua non of progress (see Chapter 14, Living Constitution).

One small example: During the recent debate over reforming Medicare, many liberals insisted that any backsliding amounted to a sacrilegious violation of a fundamental "covenant." Writing in *The New Republic*, Jonathan Cohn, a leading health care expert, quotes LBJ's Medicare law signing statement:

> "No longer will older Americans be denied the healing miracle of modern medicine," Johnson said at the signing ceremony. "No longer will illness crush and destroy the savings that they have so carefully put away over a lifetime so that they might enjoy dignity in their later years."

"Read those quotes carefully," Cohn advises us, "because they spell out the covenant that Johnson made with the American people on that day: A promise that the elderly and (certain groups) of the poor would get comprehensive medical insurance, no matter what."[9] Now I cannot and will not criticize Cohn for believing that the government should ensure that the truly needy and elderly receive medical care. That is an honorable, intellectually defensible position. Though I should at least mention that wanting the needy to receive health care does not necessarily require a vast expansion of the federal government. But my point isn't to debate the means to a desirable end.

No, the reason why I find Cohn's argument so useful is that it illustrates the progressive mind-set so perfectly. Cohn argues that LBJ made a covenant with the American people—a covenant is a sacred contract—

to ensure that the poor would henceforth and forever get comprehensive medical insurance. Here's the problem: Presidents cannot bind future presidents, never mind future Congresses. Any law can be revisited, any presidential decree may be rescinded. One would hope that Cohn would recognize this fact given that his magazine routinely argues that not even the Constitution itself should be considered permanently binding and restrictive (which is to say it shouldn't permanently bind or constrict progressives in ways they find inconvenient). What offends Cohn and his fellow progressives is the suggestion that any liberal victory once pocketed can ever be reversed. Laws and words have no binding power on future generations, but once Team Progressive puts points on the scoreboard, they can never come off. That is what is sacred, because *their* conception of history only goes in one direction.

This is the living, breathing heart of the progressive worldview. It is as ideological as any conviction can be. And that is fine. There is nothing wrong and a great deal that is right with having ideological convictions. What is offensive to logic, culturally pernicious, and, yes, infuriating to me is the claim that it is not an ideological tenet. Progressives lie to themselves and the world about this fact. They hide their ideological agenda within Trojan Horse clichés and smug assertions that they are simply pragmatists, fact finders, and empiricists who are clearheaded slaves to "what works."

Consider one largely bipartisan example of what I am talking about: competitiveness. For decades American presidents, Republican and Democrat, have invoked competitiveness as an excuse to intervene in the private sector. Often competitiveness means the exact opposite: protecting industries or firms that cannot compete. In the name of competitiveness we subsidize car companies or solar power companies—or shield them through tariffs—while claiming it is vital to do so to stay competitive.

But President Obama has lifted the rhetoric to new heights with all of his talk about "winning the future" (a phrase Newt Gingrich tried to corner some years earlier, so it must poll well). According to President Obama—and pop gurus like Thomas Friedman—the State must pick new industries and new products that will create the jobs of the twenty-first century. Like the ideological pilgrims who went to the Soviet Union and found "the future—and it works" (in Lincoln Steffens's memorable

phrase), journalists like Friedman are feted in China and ride high-speed rail systems and come back saying we must adopt similar authoritarian or statist policies if we want to compete with China.

The vast majority of economists, on the left and the right, consider competitiveness—that is, economic competitiveness between nations—to be at least a deeply flawed if not completely worthless concept. Businesses compete, nations don't. If China was the victim of a horrendous plague or ravaged by a destructive civil war, America might benefit in terms of geopolitical status, force projection, etc., but it would be dealt a massive economic blow as well, having lost income from a vital trading partner. Or as Paul Krugman put it in his famous 1994 *Foreign Affairs* essay, "Competitiveness: A Dangerous Obsession" (these were the days when Krugman cared more about academic and intellectual rigor than journalistic bombast):

> [T]he moral is clear: while competitive problems could arise in principle, as a practical, empirical matter the major nations of the world are not to any significant degree in economic competition with each other. Of course, there is always a rivalry for status and power—countries that grow faster will see their political rank rise. So it is always interesting to *compare* countries. But asserting that Japanese growth diminishes U.S. status is very different from saying that it reduces the U.S. standard of living—and it is the latter that the rhetoric of competitiveness asserts.[10]

The appeal of competitiveness lies in its power as a buzzword, not as a serious concept. Business audiences like it, because they think in those terms and think governments should be run like businesses. More problematic, the public likes it because it is ultimately a base appeal to nationalism disguised as technocratic expertise. We can beat the Chinese by throwing money at certain industries! Implicit in this line of argumentation is the assumption that government officials are smarter than investors. It was this logic that empowered the Obama administration to throw billions into green energy white elephants like Solyndra.

There are policies that one could lump under the rubric of competitiveness that would actually help the United States of America become

more affluent vis-à-vis other nations, but such policies aren't nearly as exciting for policy makers, because it is very difficult to take credit for their successes. A flatter, more progrowth tax policy, for example, would attract more investment and entrepreneurship. Spending on basic scientific research and education can be defended on grounds of competitiveness; so could more intelligent immigration policies. But such policies are defensible on more basic grounds: They're good for our economy and for our productivity.

But that's not the appeal of competitiveness. Industrial planners like competitiveness because they like industrial planning. They like spending money on dams and roads and windmills because there's a photo op at the ribbon cutting. They like to believe they are smarter and wiser than the free market economy, and if only we could put them in charge, they could impose a more rational, planned economic system. That is why Thomas Friedman wishes we could be "China for a Day," because in China planners are given command over the economy (why not "Nazis for a Day"?). Before there was Friedman and his man crush on Chinese communism there was the cabal of industrial planners—Kevin Phillips, James Fallows, Lester Thurow, et al.—of the 1980s and early 1990s, who were convinced that Japan's MITI—the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (renamed in 2001)—was needed to replace our outdated system. Phillips wrote in his *Staying on Top: The Business Case for a National Industrial Strategy*: "[B]usinessmen . . . must set aside old concepts of laissez-faire. . . . It is time for the United States of America to begin plotting its economic future."[11] Before then, in the 1960s it was the Whiz Kids who held that modern economics was too complicated to leave to voters and consumers. They inherited the argument from the New Dealers, who pushed for an "economic dictatorship" in the words of Stuart Chase. They, in turn, were standing on the shoulders of the progressive technocrats, who took their cues from the Soviet Union (and Woodrow Wilson), who insisted, in the words of Walter Lippmann, that we must abandon the "drift" of nineteenth-century laissez capitalism and adopt the "mastery" of economic planners. You can keep going, but the story is the same: arrogant intellectuals trying to win czarlike power over the economy with fake arguments that sound reasonable.

So that is what this book is about. It is about the clichés that have a

tyrannical hold on our minds and the phrases that serve to advance ideological agendas that would expand and enhance the State's mastery over our lives. By no means are all expansions of the State tyrannical, but for all intents and purposes, all advances of tyranny are statist. These are the themes and convictions that inform the coming chapters. They informed my decision to include some clichés while ignoring others. The first few chapters are an attempt to flesh out this fundamental point, by coming to the defense of ideology properly understood.

I do not claim that the conservative mind isn't bound by clichés from time to time, or that my collection exhausts the subjects covered, never mind those not covered. But I would and do argue that conservatives are more honest about their indebtedness to ideology. We declare our principles and make our arguments more openly. My only humble hope is that what I write here helps people, conservatives and liberals alike, rethink the way they understand the world around them, and maybe enjoy themselves a bit in the process.