

# Book Reviews

**The Cure: How Capitalism Can Save American Health Care**, by David Gratzer, M.D., 325 pp, hardback, \$17.13, ISBN 1594031533, New York, N.Y., Encounter Books, 2006.

With our turn into a new century, free people are restless, and dissatisfied with some remnants of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—especially their medical care. Still free to choose, many have turned to a different paradigm.

The *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported in 1993 that Americans had spent \$12 billion outside the traditional medical system—a sum equal to the amount spent on traditional medical care. Were all those people hoodwinked out of their money?

The current system came into its own a century ago with the publication of the Flexner Report. This conferred a new legitimacy on medical science—particularly pharmacology—ostensibly separating real medicine from quackery. A sudden, dramatic shift in the market occurred.

A century later, the system is deeply troubled. There are too many books, and too much media attention devoted to the idea that more government will save the system, implicitly accepting a Marxist philosophy. Dr. Gratzer's book describes another, ostensibly more market-driven approach to saving the system.

David Gratzer, M.D., an academic and practicing psychiatrist born and schooled in Canada, begins with a succinct history of the economics of the current system. He identifies two starting dates: Oct 26, 1943, when the Internal Revenue Service ruled that health insurance premiums would not be taxed, and Dec 1, 1942, with publication of the Beveridge Report, from which the British National Health Service was born in 1948. Gratzer concludes that these events led to the phenomenon of “over-insurance.”

He next emphasizes President Richard M. Nixon's “crisis” brought on because of

the “breakdown” in the system a mere six years after the birth of Medicare. Vice-President Nelson A. Rockefeller at that time called for national health insurance; Nixon instead delivered government-subsidized health maintenance organizations.

Gratzer then describes a “third way”—“Consumer Driven Health Care.” He considers the Medical Savings Account idea presented by John Goodman and Patrick Rooney to be an example of “working with the system.” Its success depends on making the current version of Health Savings Accounts popular and less regulated.

The two numbers “46” and “18”—for 46,000,000 uninsured and 18,000 deaths allegedly caused by poor medical care—are political manipulations, Gratzter writes. He presents data to dispel the myths and proposes that the solution is to make insurance more affordable while helping those who need help.

Examples of government social experimentation include TennCare (Tennessee Medicaid) and the new Medicare drug coverage. The next stage, Gratzter fears, will be more price controls. This will not help the four “i's” that constitute Medicare's shortcomings: it is inadequate, inefficient, inequitable, and insolvent.

The other government program that makes an enormous contribution to the problem, Gratzter believes, is the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). He holds the popular view that the only real problem with pharmaceuticals is that we can't get them to market fast enough, and that the FDA holds the keys. But he presents no academic data or other evidence to support this thesis. Which drugs are held back from the public more in the United States than elsewhere? Why is there no free flow of safety information available from foreign usage of drugs if they are in foreign markets before they come to the U.S. market? Most importantly, why are so many people choosing to eschew drugs altogether?

The government-funded program of Canada is not the answer, Gratzter warns, recounting the long delays in the delivery of medical services there. Instead, he proposes three principles for reform: (1) Make health care portable; (2) re-think how to provide health care to the elderly; and (3) create a market that will catalyze innovation in drugs and medical devices. Capitalism is the cure—through deregulation and increased reliance on market mechanisms.

The book, though a step in the right direction, falls short of offering a cure, which my dictionary defines as “restoration to health (the *elimination* of disease, distress, evil).” It focuses on economic aspects (without mentioning that the free market today is not “free”), not on the (failed) system's nearly total reliance on drugs and surgical procedures. The subtitle may use the politically correct term “health care,” but it makes no mention of the dissatisfaction with the restrictions in the patient-care aspects of the system. Doctors offer “medical care”; restoring health is an aspect too often left to those designated as “quacks.”

Gratzter frames the debate in the context of Marxian economics and acceptance of 20<sup>th</sup>-century concepts of medicine. The proposed solution is an opinion of how to manipulate the system to change some problem within it. If we treated cancer that way, it would be like moving a tumor to some other location to see whether it would go away.

The main problem is actually the system itself. Instead of a system based on government intrusion, we need freedom. The only role of the government should be to enforce clear rules against the use of force or fraud. Government needs to get out of the patient-doctor relationship; out of dictating standards of medical practice; out of defining or mandating insurance; out of subsidizing and protecting business interests in insurance, pharmaceuticals, or preferred forms of treatment.

The 20<sup>th</sup>-century paradigm accepts the basic assumptions of Marxism and its shaky humanist foundation of moral relativism. Americans need to be free to leave it, to use their own money to protect life and liberty, and to pursue happiness. No more public-private partnerships, no more cloak of moral superiority to third-party payment or industry-determined treatment modes. Let the market—that is, free men and women engaged in voluntary transactions—truly decide what it wants and needs.

This is not Dr. Gratzner's thesis. But his book makes the debate clearer in spite of itself.

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**Liberalism Is a Mental Disorder**, by Michael Savage, 221 pp, paperback, \$14.99, ISBN 1-5955-5043-7, Nashville, Tenn., Nelson Current, 2005.

Michael Savage is a San Francisco-based syndicated radio talk-show host. According to the book jacket, his program, the *Savage Nation*, is “the nation's No. 1 independently syndicated radio talk show, airing on more than 350 stations coast to coast.” He boasts of “10 million weekly listeners.”

*Liberalism Is a Mental Disorder* is Savage's third *New York Times* bestseller. Savage has a well-earned reputation for not mincing words, a habit that has drawn fire from the Left and the more moderate Right. It is the heatedness of Savage's commentary that makes this book both a refreshing and infuriating read.

I approached this book with some trepidation for two reasons. First, the attempt to tar political positions with the brush of mental illness has a long and sorry history. For example, the highly influential 1950 book *The Authoritarian Personality* was a clearly politicized attempt to label people who embrace traditional values as closeted Nazis. The former Soviet Union is well known to have labeled as mentally ill and “hospitalized” dissidents to silence and discredit them.

There are many recent examples of this problematic labeling as well. Conservative blogger Lawrence Auster suggested that right-wing antiwar critics were motivated

by “resentment” and displayed “impotent fury at a traitorous father figure or a supposed ‘oppressor.’”<sup>1</sup> Ben Johnson wrote of the “Certifiable Right,” and said Paul Craig Roberts is “unhinged.”<sup>2</sup> These all-purpose labels are used by Savage to label his opponents on the left, and by Auster and Johnson to label their opponents to their right. This flexibility is illustrative of the inherent imprecision of mental health explanations used for political purposes.

This sort of armchair psychoanalysis masquerading as insightful political commentary needs to be repudiated. Although I tend to dislike excessive credentialism, such analysis is often done by people without psychological training, and its assertions are not falsifiable. In the case of dueling political charges of mental illness, the alleged mental illness is, like beauty, in the eye of the beholder—and is generally not one of the legitimate diagnosable mental conditions.

I do not dispute that psychological factors may partially underlie a person's political beliefs and voting behavior. This is a well-studied area of research. But it is an area best left to experts in psychometrics and should not be politicized as just another slur.

In Savage's defense, I think it is likely that his labeling of liberalism as a mental disorder is done largely tongue in cheek, but he doesn't clarify that. He repeats the charge throughout the book. While Savage avoids the psychobabble of Auster, a liberal reader could certainly judge the label as mean-spirited even if it is not a real attempt to tar his enemies with a serious diagnosis. What keeps Savage's enemies from applying the *Authoritarian Personality* charge in retaliation? This is dangerous rhetorical ground and is best avoided.

My second reason for trepidation was that conservative literature has recently been dominated by conservative celebrities, talk-show hosts, media pundits, columnists, etc., and not by serious conservative scholars. Andrew Ferguson remarked on this trend in the *Weekly Standard*. Ferguson even takes a swipe at Savage:

Most conservative books are pseudo-books: ghostwritten pastiches whose primary purpose seems to be the photo of the “author” on the cover. What a tumble! From *The Conservative Mind* to *Savage*

*Nation*; from Clifton White to Dick Morris; from Willmoore Kendall and Harry Jaffa to Sean Hannity and Mark Fuhrman—all in little more than a generation's time. Whatever this is, it isn't progress.<sup>3</sup>

Unless Ferguson knows something I don't, I am not alleging that Savage's books are ghostwritten. This book is actually quite entertainingly written in the same combative style that Savage broadcasts. But Ferguson's larger point is correct. Most conservative literature these days is not written by scholars scouring ancient texts for new insights. In fact, there are too few conservative scholars. For every serious scholarly work like Thomas Fleming's *The Morality of Everyday Life*, there are many more Sean Hannity-style recitations of Republican Party group-think.

Savage, to his credit, actually echoes Ferguson and acknowledges and criticizes this group-think trend. He writes in the preface:

What used to be a conservative movement has become nothing more than a series of writings and speeches devoted to attacking the Democratic Party. Even the so-called publications of America's “right-wing” such as the *Weekly Standard* are little more than support props of the Republicans (pp xiv-xv).

Here Savage is right on, and as an alternative he calls for a new “nationalism” (p xv). Savage is certainly no apologist for the Republican Party or President Bush. This does distinguish him from some of the conservative punditry who are relentless GOP apologists. He is particularly hard on Bush on immigration (Chapter Three) and the administration's conduct of the Iraq War (Chapter One). But he differs from other conservative celebrities largely by degree, not kind. Hence, he falls into the same trap he decries above. His criticism is of liberals, and by default Democrats, and Republicans that he sees as unfaithful, but he does not challenge or even examine the fundamental assumptions of the modern conservative movement, assumptions that are arguably not conservative at all.

For example, Savage cannot free himself from modern conservative group-think when he states, “. . .the single biggest

threat facing America is the rise of Islamofascism in this country” (p xxiii). Oh really? Not “Islamofascism” abroad, mind you, but its rise here at home. Without addressing the imprecision of the term “Islamofascism,” this is a highly debatable point. Is it a worse threat than massive government debt and obligations? Is it a worse threat than the unbridled immigration Savage decries? In fact, isn’t immigration a necessary precondition to the rise of “Islamofascism” in America? I do not think Savage is concerned about the wide-scale conversion to Islam of native inhabitants.

Savage belongs to what could be called the disgruntled Right, conservatives who are angry with the Republican Party and President Bush for their perceived deviations from the conservative party line. A renewed conservative movement will need more of these angry conservatives because Savage is entirely correct that Bush and the GOP Establishment are not advocating for, nor attempting to advance conservative causes. But it will also need more conservatives who are willing to question some of the fundamental assumptions. This, Savage generally fails to do. Savage is essentially a more strident version of more of the same.

For example, Savage calls for a new nationalism. While the GOP and Bush cannot be accused of nationalism as they sell America down the river on immigration and globalization, part of the problem with the modern Right is that it is too nationalistic. That is why the Right initially brooked no dissent on the Iraq War or foreign intervention. As the war has dragged on, this is changing somewhat, but the default position of the official Right is still bellicosely pro-Iraq War and pro-intervention.

On the war, Savage asserts an increasingly common explanation for why things have gone wrong. We haven’t been ruthless enough in its conduct. Had the Bush Administration only been more ruthless, shed more blood, and not been held back by fighting a “politically correct war” (p 3), the situation in Iraq would be much better. But Savage fails to question the fundamental assumptions that got us involved in the Iraq War in the first place: that interventionism necessarily makes us

safer; that policing the world is a desirable or constitutional burden; and that interventionism is, in fact, a conservative position—which historically and philosophically it certainly is not.

If the purpose of this book is to bash the Left, it succeeds. If its purpose is to articulate a coherent reason to be a conservative, other than the other guys are insane, it fails. Ultimately, Savage has written a book that is primarily “devoted to attacking the Democratic Party,” which is what he decried in the preface.

If the reader wants fiery and well-written conservative rhetoric aimed at the Left, then *Liberalism Is a Mental Disorder* is a book for you. If the reader wants to understand conservatism from a historical perspective, then *The Conservative Mind* by Russell Kirk would be a much better place to start.

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<sup>1</sup> Auster L. The antiwar Right’s bent view of the world. *Front Page Magazine*, Dec 16, 2004. Available at: <http://www.frontpagemag.com>. Accessed Jul 30, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson B. Paul Craig Roberts and the Certifiable Right. *Front Page Magazine*, Mar 17, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Ferguson A. Older and wiser? A *Weekly Standard* 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary symposium, Sep 19, 2005.

**The Politically Incorrect Guide to Science**, by Tom Bethell, 270 pp, paperback, \$19.95, ISBN 0-89526-031-X, Washington D.C., Regnery Publishing, 2007.

As someone with a healthy natural cynicism, I expected this book to be enjoyable, but ultimately only to confirm many of my own previously held suspicions. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the book went further and actually gave me a new perspective on several different issues.

The author’s introduction aptly points out that scientists, who are now experts in a very narrowly defined field, rarely challenge each other for fear of stepping into an area that is not within the same

narrow confines as their own. He then describes how journalists traditionally are fearful of challenging scientists, incorrectly assuming that science is above politics, and ultimately become pawns in the politicization of science.

The media, however, are not unwilling accomplices. They get plenty of mileage out of fomenting our fears as well as encouraging our hopes. Bethell skillfully explains how the relationship between scientists and journalists reaches its zenith when the government officially sides with the scientific and public consensus on a given issue, thus institutionalizing it.

Although many liberals fail to recognize this obvious fact, government agencies benefit from the fears that incorrect reporting of science can conjure up. The agencies reinforce unfounded science by embarking on publicity campaigns that essentially state: “The problem is even greater than we thought, but don’t worry, we are making headway in solving it. So increase our budget—now!”

As Bethell describes, competition of theories has, historically, driven scientific progress. When the government or politicians get into the act, or scientists mistaking faith for fact form a premature consensus, competition of ideas may be reduced or eliminated, and dissent is discouraged. Bethell ultimately succeeds in eliciting healthy skepticism about the objectivity of scientists, the benevolence of government, the responsible journalism of the media, and the vigilance of the public.

The topics that Bethell illuminates include global warming, nuclear energy, background radiation, chemical hormesis (potentially beneficial effects caused by low-dose exposure to toxins), DDT, biodiversity and endangered species, the AIDS epidemic, cloning, stem-cell research, gene mapping, cancer research, the science-vs.-religion debate, and evolution vs. intelligent design.

The book is worth reading for enjoyment as well as for information on some important subjects.

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