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Elitists for Revolution

Franklin Roosevelt led America through depression and war. And weren't the Founding Fathers limousine liberals *avant la lettre*?

By *Daniel Akst*

May 9, 2016 6:39 p.m. ET

Pity the limousine liberals, their hearts bleeding in their sleek sedans. Hardly anyone has a kind word for them—yet much like the poor they claim to champion, these strange aristocrats seem always to be with us. Weren't the Founding Fathers limousine liberals *avant la lettre*? They espoused egalitarianism, yet held slaves. They bridled at colonial rule, yet inflicted it on the Indians. Loath to enshrine privilege, they nonetheless reveled in rights withheld from women, minorities and the landless.

This is the sort of thing that has always given limousine liberals a bad name. The essence of the indictment is hypocrisy: Liberalism is held to have serious costs from which its affluent advocates insulate themselves—by commuting from sylvan suburbs beyond the reach of the school busing they advocated, to cite but one example.

The term “limousine liberal” was coined, evidently, by Mario Procaccino, a stocky immigrant lawyer with an unfashionable little mustache, in his 1969 campaign for New York's mayoralty (during which he defeated Norman Mailer, among others, in the Democratic primary). His antagonist was towering, patrician John Vliet Lindsay, a liberal Republican who prevailed as a third-party candidate. Lindsay might have been sent by central casting to inspire the new sobriquet; the mere mention of his name, in my working-class corner of Brooklyn during the grim interregnum between the Dodgers and the hipsters, was akin to invoking Beelzebub.

On the other hand, there may be something to be said for limousine liberals. The ones who brought forth this nation set us on a path to freedom and equality, however tortuous. Franklin Roosevelt, the limousine liberal par excellence, led America through depression and war. And during the 1960s, men like Lindsay, for all their failings, helped us navigate stormy waters. As the historian Geoffrey Kabaservice has written: “The peaceful transition of the United States from a system much like aristocracy to a more open society was one of the epochal changes in the nation's history, yet the role of

the
guardians
who made it
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curiously

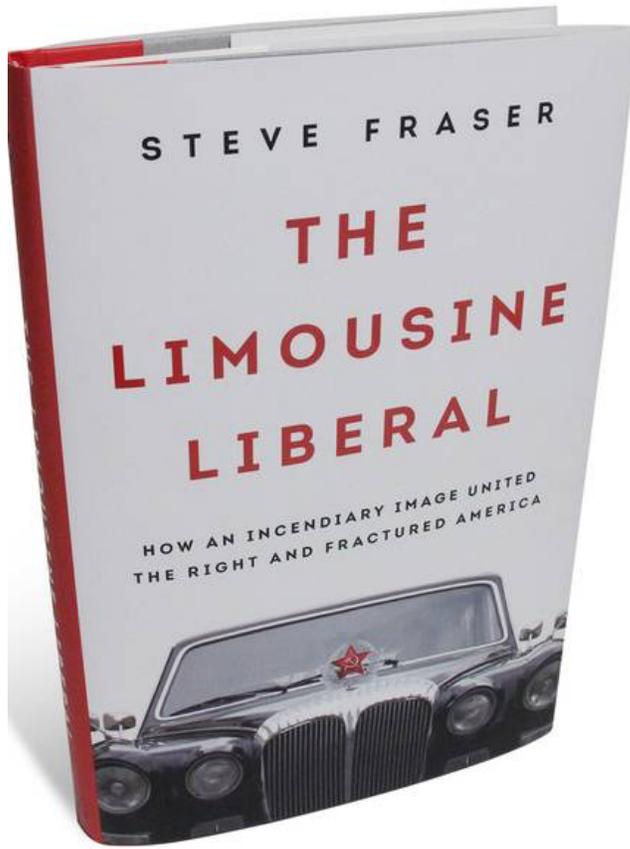


PHOTO: WSJ

THE LIMOUSINE LIBERAL

By Steve Fraser
Basic, 291 pages, \$27.50

understudied.”

Steve Fraser, in “The Limousine Liberal,” goes some of the way toward correcting this oversight,

even if he is less concerned with anatomizing members of the species than with examining the resentment of those who loathe it. He makes good use of the trope to produce a slashing account of the ways in which working-class revanchism has been exploited by rabble rousers from the toxic Father Coughlin to the cynical Donald Trump.

“Limousine liberalism is the specter haunting American politics,” Mr. Fraser writes, echoing a certain bearded political philosopher with whom he seems a tad too chummy at times. And what is a limousine liberal? Mr. Fraser’s simple definition: “history’s oxymoron, an elitist for revolution, working to undermine the ancient regime—or at least pretending to do so.” Mr. Fraser argues that the durability of the term makes it ideal for understanding a century or more of American political life. The limousine liberal, he says, remains “at the heart of an aggrieved sense felt by millions that they have been passed over—their material needs ignored, their cultural preferences treated with contempt—by a cluster of elites that run the country.”

The concept predates the epithet, as the author demonstrates. Coughlin

assailed “Congressmen from New York,” Ivy Leaguers, “big shots” and bankers at their “grouse-hunting estates in Scotland who never travelled west of Buffalo.” Often such attacks were garnished with insinuations about effeminacy: Sen. Joseph McCarthy referred to Dean Acheson as “this pompous diplomat in striped pants,” with his “cane, spats, and tea-sipping little finger.” Vice President Spiro Agnew castigated antiwar protesters as an “effete corps of impudent snobs.” Conservative activist Richard Viguerie would later predict a backlash against “the effete gentlemen of the Northeastern establishment.” Summing up the limousine liberal’s supposed insularity, a Procaccino campaign memo said that media owners supported Lindsay because they were “rich super-assimilated people” who were “protected by their courtiers, doormen, and private police guards” and had “no feeling for the small middle class shopkeeper.”

Mr. Fraser’s main concern is with the use of limousine liberalism as a straw man by demagogues, but he acknowledges that limousine liberals exist in reality as well as in fantasy and is astute on the role they play in bringing about change without bringing the house down. He seems to let them off too easily at times, so intent is he on skewering their populist antagonists. Still, he writes wonderfully, and his text is studded with insights.

He observes, for example, that wealth and liberalism often go hand in hand at public companies: “The American corporation—subject not to the whims, faith, and prejudices of a founding owner or his dynastic heirs, but to the more impersonal motivations of managerial functionaries—is among the most politically correct institutions in the country.” He’s also noticed that for decades we’ve been democratizing limousine liberalism by allowing anyone with a good social-media startup or marketable degree to add a Volvo or Subaru to the fleet. Resentment too has opened up, as new entrepreneurs, many in the Sunbelt, have joined their grievances to those of working Americans buffeted by economic and social change.

Mr. Fraser is an energetic polemicist, but eventually the mordant fervor of his own resentments grows tiresome. Too often “The Limousine Liberal” reads like one of those sourpuss histories in which all motives are ulterior and evil capitalism propels events irresistibly forward. Even so, the author has produced a timely tour de force to remind us that limousine liberals are still very much with us—as are the politicians and pundits who portray them as such bogeymen.

Mr. Akst writes the Journal’s weekly news quiz.

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