The Review

Grover Cleveland: Just Obey the Constitution

A Man of Iron: The Turbulent Life and Improbable Presidency of Grover Cleveland, by Troy Senik, New York: Threshold Editions, 2022, 323 pages, hardcover.

When asked after retiring from public life how a man of his limited education had been able to succeed as president, Grover Cleveland explained that the Constitution "is so simple and so strong that all a man has to do is to obey it and do his best and he gets along."

That sums up the political philosophy of the 22nd and 24th president of the United States, and also of this biography by Troy Senik. It is clear that Senik is greatly sympathetic to Cleveland's philosophy, which the author describes as "classical liberal." Cleveland was a man who favored limited government, and that is the theme of this excellent account of the life of a president we could do well to have in the White House once again.

Senik offers an abundance of historical anecdotes that provide pleasure for those who love the study of history and the individuals who made it. For example, Cleveland once was a teaching colleague in a school for the blind with Fanny Crosby — perhaps the greatest gospel hymnist in American history. Cleveland was the son of a Presbyterian minister, but Cleveland was only an irregular churchgoer as an adult until his retirement from public life, when he returned to the faith of his youth.

Cleveland had a limited formal education. He did not go to law school, but became a lawyer through the old practice of "reading the law" — serving as an apprentice to a lawyer. He got into politics as the Democratic candidate for sheriff in Buffalo, New York. The sheriff's office was notorious for corruption, and Cleveland ended that during his one year in the position.

After serving as sheriff, Cleveland returned to his law practice. After his partner and best friend, Oscar Folsom, died in a carriage accident, Folsom's widow, Emma, and 11-year-old daughter, Frances, became his wards, which meant he handled their financial affairs.

Cleveland did not seek public office again for eight years, refusing to do so until October 1881, when the local Democratic Party needed someone to run for mayor of Buffalo. In his acceptance speech for the nomination, Cleveland summed up his ideal of public service: "A public office is a public trust."

As he had done with the sheriff's office, he cleaned up corruption in the mayor's office. He also used the veto power to reject every attempt for new spending, including an appropriation for the Fourth of July festivities of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) — the politically powerful organization of Union veterans. Cleveland made a personal donation equal to 10 percent of the GAR's budget request, then
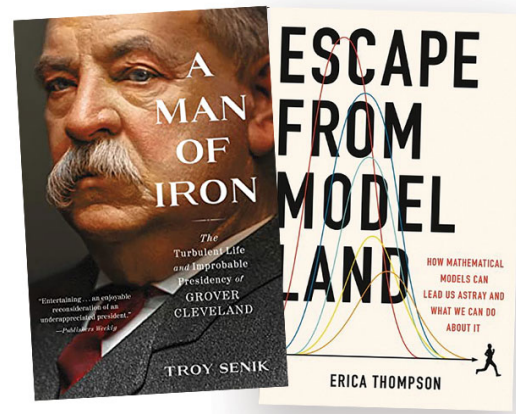
led an effort to raise the rest through private funds. Senik notes, "In the end, the organization raised 40 percent more than it had requested from the city treasury."

This story illustrates Cleveland's aversion to spending government funds except for legitimate purposes. In a speech at Princeton on the occasion of the college's 150th anniversary in 1896, near the end of his presidency, Cleveland condemned "selfish interest [that] seeks undue private benefit through government aid."

While mayor, Cleveland opposed paying for sewage repairs with bonds, arguing that it was cheaper to do so without incurring debt. In the end, the cost of the project was negotiated down to about one-half of the lowest bid.

After only a year in the mayor's office, Cleveland was elected governor of New York in 1882, by the largest margin in history to that time. As governor of a swing state, it was not surprising that the Democratic Party turned to him in the 1884 election for president.

The 1884 campaign is remembered for accusations against the character of both Cleveland and his Republican opponent, James Blaine. The charge that Cleveland had fathered a child with a widowed woman, Maria Halpin, was bad enough, but then a newspaper said that he had raped the woman. Halpin, however, denounced the rape story as a lie.

By this time, Cleveland had developed a strong distaste for the press. According to Senik, when Cleveland was governor, *The New York Times* "cited an excursion to Newport, Rhode Island, as proof that he was overly fond of junketeering." Cleveland "replied incredulously that he hadn't even made the trip." It would not be the last time that *The New York Times* printed stories that were less than accurate.

Cleveland won the presidency, despite all the negative press, by taking New York by 1,149 votes and Connecticut by 1,300 votes.

As president, Cleveland continued to implement his limited-government philosophy into policy, but now he had new issues to consider that he had not had to deal with as a governor, such as the debate over the gold standard and foreign policy.

Cleveland was a firm believer in "sound money," and to him that meant defending the gold standard. Eventually, his Democratic Party would reject him over this issue more than any other, but Cleveland never wavered. In his day, attacks upon sound money came from those who hoped to cause inflation by increased coinage of silver, while in our day it comes from federal spending, debt, and increasing the money supply through actions of the Federal Reserve System.

Keeping with his philosophy of limiting government spending, in 1887 Cleveland vetoed a bill to provide seeds for a drought-stricken part of Texas. He explained why in his veto message:

> I can find no warrant for such an appropriation in the Constitution, and I do not believe that the power and duty of the general government ought to be extended to the relief of individual suffering which is in no manner properly related to the public service or benefit. A prevalent tendency to disregard the limited mission of this power and duty should, I think, be steadfastly resisted.… Federal aid in such cases encourages the expectation of paternal care on the part of the government and weakens the sturdiness of our national character.

Another issue that we still struggle with today is the push for intervention into the affairs of other nations. Cleveland summed up his noninterventionist philosophy early in his presidency:

> The genius of our institutions … dictate the scrupulous avoidance of any departure from that foreign policy commended by the history, the traditions, and the prosperity of our republic…. It is the policy of peace suitable to our interests. It is the policy of neutrality, rejecting any share in foreign broils and ambitions upon other continents…. It is the policy of Monroe and of Washington and Jefferson — Peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations; entangling alliance with none.

While he generally admired his second successor, Republican William McKinley, he expressed disappointment that President McKinley had allowed himself to be "seduced by imperialism." When McKinley agreed to annex Hawaii — which Cleveland had refused to do a few years earlier — Cleveland said, "I am ashamed of the whole affair."

One of the most difficult aspects of the Cleveland presidency was dealing with the aforementioned GAR. The GAR was constantly lobbying for increased pension benefits — the second-largest expenditure in the federal budget during the last part of the 19th century, which in many ways paved the way for the expansion of the federal welfare state of the 20th and 21st centuries. After he vetoed private pension bills — grants to individual veterans by Congress that had been rejected through the normal application process — he was castigated as some sort of "closet Confederate."

The GAR's opposition contributed greatly to Cleveland's defeat for reelection in 1888, but he was able to regain the White House in 1892. Since his two terms were separated by Republican Benjamin Harrison's tenure, Cleveland is classified as both the 22nd and the 24th president.

Senik covers all the political battles of the Cleveland presidency, as well as the personal life of Grover Cleveland, including his marriage to Frances Folsom — the 21-year-old daughter of his dead law partner — when he was 49 years old. Cleveland had bought Frances her first baby carriage. The wedding was the first ever in the White House itself, and the marriage produced multiple children, including their first daughter, popularly known as "Baby" Ruth — eventually the name of the candy bar.

Frances provided an insight into her husband's tender side. Grover overheard his young daughters mention, Senik wrote, that a "little girl in their class had come up empty when the students received Valentines. The former president of the United States … had his cheeks stained with tears at the idea of a child's heartbreak. A valentine bearing the name of Grover Cleveland was delivered to the little girl's home by messenger."

When Cleveland's death came on June 24, 1908, his last recorded words were, "I have tried so hard to do right."

Senik has provided us with a good biography of the life of Grover Cleveland.

— *Steve Byas*

Hazards of Assumptions, Projections

Escape From Model Land: How Mathematical Models Can Lead Us Astray and What We Can Do About It, by Erica Thompson, New York: Basic Books, 2022, 256 pages, hardcover.

Want to know what's going to happen tomorrow? Next month? How about in a year, or a decade, or more? You could consult a fortune-teller with a crystal ball or, if you think it would fit the audience better and you have a scientific bent, enlist the efforts of highly educated statistical modelers. Do keep in mind, however, that the intellectuals that you retain just might be the types who are so shrewd that they can't see — or forecast — the obvious.

Author Erica Thompson is a statistician with a clearer vision than most, able to distinguish between the cozy, oh-so-flexible Model Land (her term) and our real world. Moreover, she's comfortable with the aphorism (coined by another statistician, George Box) that "All models are wrong, but some are useful." She offers plenty of illustrations of such models, some of which are accompanied by "quantitative scenarios," potential futures that might ensue depending on the assumptions.

Does that sound a bit like an oracle reading entrails? Perhaps to some, but keep in mind that this usually starts as an academic exercise — albeit with muscle. Still, just because they are projections does not mean that these creations of algorithmic formulae don't affect the real world. They do.

As London's *Economist* has made clear, such mathematical models are the "backbone" of big data and artificial intelligence: "If data is the input, algorithms are the tool and models are the product. They are everywhere, from e-commerce tips to economic and climate-change forecasts."

Modeling, as explained in *Escape From Model Land*, is what you do when you don't have enough data.

Because the world really is inundated with data, they need frameworks, which is where models can assist, as is pointed out by the author. A model's contribution is to "add relationships between data."

"Following the Science" Can Be Detrimental

In this volume, Thompson concentrates on public-health, environmental, and economic decision-making — and how they can be used or abused. Along the way, she lays out numerous warning signs, such as the one below — which is certainly familiar to Americans who were maltreated because of the veneration of some convenient Covid-19 projections that seemed to be in charge.

Many still remember when speculation was handed down as scientific gospel, with the virus to be controlled if the public just submitted to "two weeks to flatten the curve," a goal that was extended over and over again.

Public-health models, as the author explains, refer

> clearly to benefits and harms of different courses of action, but no model can "decide" what to do until the relative weightings of different kinds of benefits and harms are specified. Science cannot tell us how to value things; doing so involves purely human moral judgements. As such, the idea of "following the science" is meaningless.

In fact, it is likely counterproductive. If your neighbor told you that a particularly brilliant computer had kicked out some figures that meant you needed to close your businesses and schools, you would rightly call that preposterous. But when "science" says so, many buy the fable and fall into the line that is endorsed and enforced by governmental authorities.

It is apparent that the author is no fan of those who boast of following science as a way to end debate. In another section, Thompson expounds on how relying on models for information "tends to lead to a

kind of accountability gap." Who, she asks,

> is responsible if a model makes harmful predictions? The notion of "following the science," becomes a screen behind which both decision-makers and scientists can hide, saying, "the science says we must do X" in some situations and "it's only a model" in others.

The modeler/statistician/author also speaks to the perception of the public on the models, writing: "If we are serious about addressing lack of confidence in science, it is necessary for those who currently make their living from and have built their reputations on their models to stop trying to push their version of reality on others."

All Assumptions Are True in Model Land

The author, who lives in West Wales, is a senior policy fellow at the London School of Economics' Data Science Institute and a fellow of the London Mathematical Laboratory. She has a Ph.D. from Imperial College London. Of late, Thompson has been working on the limitations of models of the spread of Covid-19, humanitarian crises, and climate change. *Escape From Model Land* was originally published in Great Britain, and many of the examples (though certainly not all) are British, as is the spelling. (E.g.,Americans have *modelers*; the Brits, *modellers*.)

Our journey through the book takes us from the entrance, where Model Land is introduced, to the potential escape. As the author makes clear, what she calls Model Land is "a wonderful place" because if "all of our assumptions are true, we can really make progress on understanding our models and how they work. We can make predictions. We can investigate many different configurations of a model, and run it with different inputs to see what would happen in different circumstances."

Model Land, as the author describes, is easy to enter. However, "it is not easy to leave. Having constructed a beautiful, internally consistent model and a set of analysis methods that describe the model in detail, it can be emotionally difficult to acknowledge that the initial assumptions on which the whole thing is built are not literally true." How can we find the exits, wonders the author, and still make use of the insight the models may offer "without running the risk of taking our models too literally"?

You might say that enthusiasm can be a good engine, but it takes real intelligence to be the driver.

Chapters between the front door and the back door emphasize — among other topics — pandemics ("Totally Under Control"), financial markets ("Masters of the Universe"), and climate change ("The Atmosphere is Complicated.")

Making a Complex Subject Comprehensible

While the subject does not easily lend itself to levity, the author proves she can turn a phrase or borrow a good one (with attributions) to make her points. For instance, she comments about an American philosopher of science who maintains that the laws of physics, when they apply, only do so "*ceteris paribus* — with all other things remaining equal." "In Model Land," continues Thompson, "we can make sure that happens. In the real world, though, the *ceteris* very rarely stay *paribus*."

The author repeats her cautions against continuing to be "lost in a world where different value judgements are dressed up as scientific disagreements, like the disagreements about burning fossil fuels in order to support economic growth, or closing down sectors that support livelihoods in order to

save lives from a virus."

Credit to Thompson for appreciating the quip by the late Robert Heinlein about a key difference between climate and weather, to wit: "Climate is what you expect and weather is what you get." (The fact that Heinlein is atop this reviewer's all-time favorite science-fiction author list may affect his reasoning.) Readers may be aware of his acronym: TANSTAAFL ("There Ain't No Such Thing as a Free Lunch"). And, while we are here, this is another Heinlein line that could be applied to the topic of the book under review: "Everything is theoretically impossible, until it is done."

Thompson also likes the comment of Marcel Boumans, a historian and philosopher of science at Utrecht University, who says that "model-building is like baking a cake without a recipe." Despite (or because of) her being in the business, Thompson mocks what she calls the common refrain of policy-relevant science, often rendered as "Further research needed," which she translates into "Give us some more money, and we will get you a better answer."

On the one hand, the author puts down William Nordhaus, recipient of the 2018 Nobel Prize in Economic Science, for his work on climate, apparently dismayed at his Nobel Lections for identifying optimal global warming as 4° C — when most climate scientists claim that result would be "catastrophic." On the other hand, Thompson agrees, at least in part, with the conclusions of the late conservative media star Rush Limbaugh about the worst-case scenarios that were being peddled early in the coronavirus pandemic, and his observation that modelers were not going to be held responsible.

Here are some of the Limbaugh comments from April 2020:

> Somebody who predicts the worst cannot lose because no matter if he's wrong, he can credit his predictions for scaring people into doing the right thing to make his prediction wrong. So when the prediction's wrong it's even good news. That's what I mean by doomsayers can never lose.

Limbaugh is right, says Thompson: "Modellers are not going to be held responsible for political decisions, nor should they be" — again pointing to the all-too-common failure to communicate the limitations of models.

Missing Link

But if she earns a credit for favorably citing a prominent right-winger (can you imagine that happening in U.S. academe?), the author gets a demerit for falling short in her coverage about the well-known Neil Ferguson — a British epidemiologist and professor of mathematical biology who specializes in the patterns of spread of infectious disease — working out of Imperial College London.

Admittedly, there is a passing remark about Ferguson's resigning from SAGE (Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies) "for having a lover visit him" (among other British officials whose personal interpretations about mandates for social distancing and lockdowns were decidedly different than those for the hoi polloi). However, there is not enough about Ferguson's previous (and relevant) fallacious projections.

Yes, some of Ferguson's Covid-19 actions appear in *Escape From Model Land*, but it is hardly given the prominence it deserves, in this reviewer's view. After all, the Ferguson team produced an alarming worst-case scenario for Covid-19 (eagerly echoed by *The New York Times*, among others) that foresaw

as many as 510,000 deaths in Britain and, by extension, 2.2 million deaths in the United States in an uncontrolled spread of the disease. The simulation was a terrifying example of "garbage in, garbage out" that directly affected national policies in both countries — by making the assumptions that 81 percent of the population would be infected and 0.9 percent of them would die. Well after the fact, Ferguson (who by then had been dubbed "Professor Lockdown") acknowledged that he had "oversimplified things" with his doomsday predictions.

Not included at all in *Escape From Model Land* are mentions of the influential Dr. Anthony Fauci, the physician-scientist, immunologist, and former White House chief medical advisor who was the longtime director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. That might be marginally excusable in a (primarily) British book, but Fauci's influence was not restricted to the United States, and the omission also ignores the Ferguson-Fauci link.

We'll drop it in here, taking a reference from Steven Mosher's valuable book *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Pandemics* (reviewed in these pages in our January 30, 2023 issue). Dr. Fauci, as Mosher put it, "seems to have made a habit of bending science to his own political ends. This may have been why, at the very beginning of the pandemic, he promoted a model from the Imperial College London that predicted millions of deaths in the United States. It later turned out that the model, authored by the now-disgraced Professor Neil Ferguson, was 'highly flawed,' which is a polite way of saying that it was algorithmic garbage."

It wasn't a one-off, as noted above. Ferguson had previously made widely inflated (albeit influential) predictions about, among others, the massive numbers of deaths expected from bird flu and swine flu in the U.K. Of course, as we have seen, some doomsayers do seem to get a pass.

This Way to the Egress

Escape From Model Land does a good job of showing how and why models respond to the expectations of those making them, even while tending to reflect their creators' perspectives and biases. It's more of a problem than it might seem on the surface. We are all, insists the author, "affected by the way mathematical modelling is done, by the way it performs decision-making and the way it shapes daily public conversations about the world."

Whether her suggestions on how to "escape" are realistic is debatable. In general, Thompson goes for taking the middle way and, as the cliché has it, not throwing out the baby with the bath water — that is, not discarding models altogether. Of course, this is her specialty, so she wants to fix it, not ditch it.

Modelers should, in her view, try to find out if there is a consensus over underlying value judgments or if they are a matter of political debate among potential decision-makers. Here, in part, is what should be done with the inevitable value judgments: Understand them, then write about them, advises the author.

As she says in her chapter about escaping (among the five principles for "responsible modelling"), a modeler should be asked, Why are the models made in this fashion? Is there anyone, she goes on, "who might disagree? What alternative specifications would be possible if you made different value judgements, and are the outcomes of the model sensitive or robust to the alternative specifications? If it isn't clear to everyone that we 'have to' flatten the pandemic curve or 'have to' reduce greenhouse gas emissions, that's probably not because they are stupid but because they disagree with the value judgements inherent in the question and the model. Allow for representations of alternative judgements without demonising those that are different from your own."

Hmm, does that seem likely? One would like to think so, but then there appear menacing visions of AOC, Maxine Waters, and Elizabeth Warren — not Florence Nightingale. Nonetheless, the author does make a largely convincing case for not blaming ultimately political decisions on modelers.

Sadly, in the real world, it still seems the reason that so many people claim to know the solution is because they created the problem. Maybe we can come up with a model to address that.

— William P. Hoar

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