

The Conservative Mission and Progressive Ideology

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AT THE RISK OF SEEMING too parochial, I want to outline the dimensions of a problem that has been of special concern for me and other conservative students of the American political tradition, broadly defined. This concern is not as narrow as it may at first seem. Nor, by any standard, is it insignificant; it involves no less than the future direction of our nation and whether our society will retain its legacy of liberty and self-government. As I will also indicate, our tradition has long been under assault and I see no reason to believe that it will abate in this century. What is more, for reasons I will spell out, I believe that the defense and the restoration of the tradition are missions that necessarily must be undertaken by conservatives. Certainly it is safe to say that conservative scholars, in the academy and elsewhere, are best equipped for this task.

I

I want to deal first with certain background matters that are essential for understanding the nature and the dimensions of the concerns I have in mind. For this purpose, I can do no better than to start with Burke's *Reflections on the*

Revolution in France (1790). Why so? Mainly because I have come to conclude, somewhat belatedly what many other conservative thinkers have long accepted as gospel, namely, that Edmund Burke is, indeed, the "father" of modern conservatism. In this capacity he identifies the broader missions of conservatism: what conservatives should be concerned about and what it is they should strive to conserve. He recognized that the French Revolution of 1789, fueled by various strands of radical "enlightenment" thought, represented an assault on the very pillars of Western civilization. He could see, more specifically, that the French Revolution was propelled by what today we call an ideology; an ideology that contained within itself answers to all manner of questions concerning the nature of man and his place in the order of being. Moreover, he knew that its core assumptions and teachings, quite apart from their application to French society, represented a challenge of unprecedented proportions to the civilized world and the values, beliefs, and assumptions informing it.

Near the beginning of *Reflections*—to emphasize, it seems to me, the enormity of what he sees taking place—Burke writes, "All circumstances taken together, the French Revolution is the most astonishing that has hitherto happened in the

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world." He takes note of its bewildering course: "Everything," he remarks, "seems out of nature in this strange chaos of levity and ferocity, and of all sorts of crimes jumbled together with all sorts of follies." "This monstrous tragicomic scene," he continues, arouses "opposite passions" that "sometimes mix with each other," namely, "alternate contempt and indignation, alternate laughter and tears, alternative scorn and horror."¹ But Burke regarded the French Revolution unique is still another respect; it "has brought France undisguised calamities at a higher price than any nation has purchased the most unequivocal blessings."² These calamities, he takes pains to make clear, did not result, as we might expect, from "fear" or retribution for oppression and abuse on the part of the king. On the contrary, he remarks, the "treasons, robberies, rapes, assassinations, slaughters, and burnings throughout their harassed land" resulted from the revolutionary leaders' "sense of perfect safety."³ Not only, we may say, did the revolution give free rein to the basest passions and instincts of man, but it was also ideologically driven.

As many have noted, what we now see as the *ideology* of the French Revolution has provided, albeit with slight variations, the rationale and underpinnings for the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century.⁴ For instance, the relationship between salient aspects of Rousseau's thought and the principles that guided Lenin are readily seen. Even Burke's characterization of the French experience can be appropriately applied to these more recent totalitarian states. For this reason, *Reflections* can be read retrospectively as a warning; that is, Burke can be understood as telling future generations that when change or revolution is predicated on the assumptions, principles, or beliefs that "inspired" the French Revolution, similar outcomes can be expected. What, perhaps, he could

not have foreseen is the magnitude of the inhumanity that characterized these totalitarian regimes or the degree to which the underlying tenets of the French Revolution would solidify into an ideology so rigid and powerful that it could distort or block out existential reality.

Clearly the most important mission of conservatism in the twentieth century was resisting in the international arena the forces that Burke identified. It is highly doubtful, for instance, that the West would have shown the determination and perseverance to "win" the Cold War had it not been for efforts of conservatives, particularly those in the United States.⁵

The disintegration of the Soviet Union was understandably greeted by conservatives with a sigh of relief. My impression and that of others with whom I have talked is that its collapse can be interpreted as a vindication of certain conservative beliefs, perhaps the most important relating to the futility of central economic planning. Many conservatives view the collapse, not so much as a vindication of conservative values, but simply as removing an organized and powerful threat to the very existence of the Western world. Whatever the reaction, however, I think it fair to say a conviction prevailed that conservatives would have to reorient themselves; that the focus of conservative concern would shift to other battlegrounds. Such a view, it should be added, is reinforced by the changed nature of the political landscape in the United States. A host of issues related to the Cold War that served to divide the parties have simply disappeared, thereby allowing for a reexamination of domestic policies and issues.

There can be no gainsaying a change of focus, but it would be highly misleading to say that the fundamental concerns of conservatism identified by Burke have vanished. On the contrary, the ideology against which he inveighed is still very much with us. As we know it is particu-

larly strong in our institutions of higher learning, but it also exercises a powerful influence on our cultural elite. To be sure, it no longer takes the stark, uncompromising, and threatening form presented by the Soviet leaders. Now its practitioners fashion their appeals to the contours of the political environment, seeking to advance their goals incrementally, often through compromise. In this way, the ideology presents an air of reasonableness, assuming a pragmatic face. Additionally, because the tactics of its practitioners must vary from nation to nation, the ideology no longer has the monolithic cast that the Soviet Union lent to it. In fact, it would seem that, to some extent at least, the stigma attached to the goals and policies of the Soviet Union may well have diminished with its collapse.

II

What I have said with regard to the character of our post-Cold War politics should come as no surprise to those who are familiar with the course American Progressivism has taken over the decades since World War II. At the height of the Cold War, it was not uncommon to hear conservatives ask, both publicly and in private conversations, whether the internal threat liberalism posed to our culture and way of life—largely because of its support for a “do your own thing” lifestyle that recognized no bounds of decency or morality—was not greater than that posed by the Soviet Union. Whether we would first rot from within or be overtaken from without was a very serious question for many conservatives from at least the late 1960s to the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Now, while there is no Soviet threat from without, the internal problems still remain. Indeed, they seem to be even more acute today.

The relationship of the foregoing observations to the crisis of the American political tradition to which I have alluded

seems clear. Our political tradition, as it is embodied in the Philadelphia Constitution of 1787 and the premises on which it is fashioned, has been under a sustained attack from the outset by those sympathetic to the doctrines underlying this ideology.⁶ What is more, enlightenment ideology so thoroughly permeates our entire culture that certain of its principles are now unquestioned components of our social and political landscape. As a consequence, significant aspects of this ideology have been tacitly accepted by sizeable proportions of the population. They have become part of our “civil theology,” so to speak.

Jefferson is generally regarded to be one of the first of our national leaders to introduce desperate bits and pieces of enlightenment teaching into our political environment. We need only consider his understanding of society and its nature to see the wide gulf that exists between conservatism and these teachings.⁷ In a letter to James Madison in September 1789, he takes up the matter of “Whether a generation of men has a right to bind another.” The overarching theme of his letter is that “The earth belongs always to the living generation”; and to this end he contends, “They [members of the living generation] are masters too of their own person, and consequently may govern them as they please.... The constitution and the laws of their predecessors extinguished them, in their natural course, with those whose will gave them being. This could preserve that being till it ceased to be itself, and no longer. Every constitution, then, and every law naturally expires at the end of 19 years. If it be enforced longer, it is an act of force and not of right.”⁸

Contrast this with Burke’s view of society and the need for continuity. In one of the better known passages of *Reflections*, he assails this conception of generational rights and prerogatives as destructive of the very patterns of expecta-

tion that must exist for a just and productive society. In contrast to those who, like Jefferson, view society in terms of a succession of discrete and “sovereign” generations, Burke conceives of society at any given moment as a multifaceted “partnership”—“a partnership in all science, a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection.” Precisely because, he continues, “the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are dead, and those who are to be born.”⁹ In this context, he discloses serious concern that the living, “unmindful of what they have received from their ancestors, or of what is due to their posterity, should act as if they were the entire masters”; that they should ever think they possess the “right” to destroy “at their pleasure the whole original fabric of their society.”

Aside from “hazarding to leave to those who come after them, a ruin instead of an habitation,” Burke continues, they would also be “teaching these successors as little to respect their contrivances, as they had themselves respected the institutions of their forefathers.” He concludes: “By this unprincipled facility of changing the state as often, and as much, and in as many ways as there are floating fancies of fashions, the whole chain and continuity of the commonwealth would be broken. No generation could link with the other. Men would become little better than the flies of a summer.”¹⁰

From an early moment in our history, then, we can see the profound differences between those who took their bearings from our tradition and those who looked to the ideology that guided the French revolutionaries. These differences also reveal a good deal about the nature of the conflict between conservatives and the ideology that propels Progressivism. Though Jefferson’s position was

inchoate, it still represented, as Burke’s critique makes clear, a central piece of the French ideology; an integral part of the ideology upon which other tenets and assumptions rested. Consequently, over the course of our history, Jefferson’s position on the generational rights certainly has not disappeared.

Today, of course, we do not confront Jefferson’s proposition in its baldest form. On the contrary, like so many other “teachings” of the enlightenment ideology it is dressed up in some pleasant shibboleth, such as, for example, that ours is a “living Constitution” that adjusts to the needs of the time. Or as Supreme Court Justice Brennan—certainly one of the foremost spokesmen for Progressivism in our time—would have it, “We current judges read the Constitution in the only way that we can; as Twentieth-Century Americans.... What the constitutional fundamentals meant to the wisdom of other times cannot be their measure to the vision of our time. Similarly, what those fundamentals mean for us, our descendants will learn, cannot be the measure to the vision of their time.”¹¹ Such a view, in effect, nullifies the very purpose of a written constitution, which is precisely what it is intended to do without saying so. And when joined with other ideological elements, it becomes an unarticulated premise for a good deal of the progressive agenda.

Progressives have consistently pictured the Founders as culturally and intellectually limited in their outlook; as at best political pragmatists, lacking principles. Given this picture of our Founders, the question of why succeeding generation should be bound down by the dead hand of the past understandably takes on added force. When this is joined with the notion of progress, another integral tenet of Progressivism, it is a short step to the proposition that each succeeding generation is moving closer to perfection. In this fashion, the view that each

generation should be entitled free rein, unencumbered by the past, "to do its own thing," not only gains additional justification, it is also regarded as indispensable for solving the problems besetting mankind.

III

The undermining of our social and political order that began in a piecemeal fashion with Jefferson gained coherence and momentum through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This can be most conveniently illustrated by turning to John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, a work that captivated the academic liberal community during most of the 1970's. This work was seemingly designed to be and is, in fact, the most comprehensive theoretical justification for the modern and massive welfare state, the outcome of progressive theory put into practice. It appeared at an appropriate time, just as President Richard Nixon was solidifying and expanding Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" programs—programs that enlarged the scope and responsibilities of the national government beyond the wildest dreams of the most impassioned New Dealers of the 1930s.

The overriding theme in Rawls's defense, briefly put, is that the core component of "justice" is equality, material and otherwise. In his words, "All social primary goods—liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect—are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these goods is to the advantage of the least favored."¹² We do not have to look far to find concrete efforts to implement this notion of justice. They are intent upon securing as far as they can conditions of equality in our public school systems across the country.¹³ To this end, they will push for virtually total federal control over education. Rawls's vision of equality of income and wealth has long been sought through the pro-

gressive income tax that, from the Progressives' point of view, never seems to be progressive enough.

What perhaps best illustrates the zeal behind the ideological commitment to equality are the existing confiscatory inheritance taxes, which causes enormous hardships for the more enterprising and productive sectors of the population, the very core of the conservative constituency in most nations. The tax is confiscatory for ideological reasons, namely, to promote equality of opportunity, to prevent an accumulation of wealth, or to secure a degree of intergenerational "fairness." The tax produces no revenue, the costs of administering its highly complex provisions exceed the amounts collected. To go no further, in very recent decades we have witnessed offshoots from these progressive notions of justice, fairness, and equality. Progressive ideology gives rise to the argument that certain groups—for instance, Native Americans and African Americans—are entitled to reparations for past "wrongs"; that equality of treatment and a "level playing field" justify affirmative action and quotas.

As Burke observed, "those who attempt to level, never equalize."¹⁴ Despite their efforts, Progressives have not made great advances in leveling American society, which is testimony to the ingenuity of the American people in avoiding the full impact of progressive measures. Yet, one look at the Rawlsian ends, that is, at those conditions that would characterize the "just" (progressive) society, is enough to tell us that the pursuit of these ends requires a massive, centralized state. Incomes and wealth cannot be redistributed, opportunities cannot be equalized, and the "bases of self-respect" (whatever that means) distributed equally, without a strong central authority vested with extensive powers over the society and the activities of individuals. That centralization is required to

achieve equality of condition is self-evident. What is equally self-evident in the American context is that Progressivism cannot tolerate decentralized authority and, for that reason, is constantly at war with the notions of federalism. This is the realm in which Progressivism has achieved truly notable victories, the most significant of these being to deprive local jurisdictions of control over matters affecting their daily lives through mandates from the Supreme Court.

For almost a century the Progressives have realized the compelling need for centralization. Indeed, it was Herbert Croly, the “father” of both modern American Progressivism and the New Deal, who stressed the need for centralization if progressive ends were to be realized. The Framers, in his view, provided us with an “incomplete democracy,” one that rendered the national government a relatively passive entity, incapable of operating effectively to achieve any “constructive national purpose.” His *magnum opus*, *The Promise of American Life*, published in 1911, was harshly critical of Jefferson for not seeing the need for a strong, active national government to effectuate his otherwise laudatory ends. “Jefferson,” he wrote, “sought an essentially equalitarian and even socialistic result by means of an essentially individualistic machinery.”¹⁵ Only when these Jeffersonian ends were coupled with the Hamiltonian means could the ideals of Progressivism, the “national promise,” be realized.

Finally, to gain a fuller picture of Progressivism and what it is up to, I must note one other highly significant aspect of its ideology, to wit, its hostility towards religion. Whereas Burke held that “religion is the basis of civil society, and the source of all good and all comfort,”¹⁶ the ideologists of the French Revolution relied upon “reason” as their guide and, as Burke documents in his *Reflections*, manifested a deep-seated, though largely

unwarranted, hostility towards the religious establishment. The intensity and persistence of this hostility towards religion is evidence that it is ideologically rooted—the product of a second reality—and that, moreover, religion is seen as posing a mortal threat to progressive ideology.

Leaving to one side the sources of the Progressives’ assault on religion, we can learn a good deal from their tactics that have secured them major victories in their efforts to seal the public square from religion. Their successes have come largely through the Court’s interpretation of the Constitution, not through the legislative processes. Fully aware that their position would never muster widespread popular support—that, indeed, it would probably engender significant popular opposition—their main thrust has been to sell the notion that the Constitution mandates a “wall of separation between church and state.” Thus, they can argue a different issue; to wit, that the issues surrounding church and state are to be settled outside of the ordinary political processes by the judiciary, the very institution that has shown a marked propensity in modern times to embrace progressive ideology. So well have Progressives succeeded in “selling” the “high wall of separation doctrine” as constitutional dictum that it is not at all uncommon to hear public commentators refer to it as if its very words were written into the First Amendment. All of this was achieved, it should be added, with appropriate distortions of our history. Justice Hugo Black’s decision in the key *Everson* decision (1947) will stand forever as testimony of this.¹⁷

IV

There is more, much more, that could be said about progressive ideology. But enough has been remarked upon to make clear the foundations for my observations about the mission of conservative

scholars in the twenty-first century. Clearly an important mission for conservative scholars of this century would be to point out the failings of Progressivism; to make public its origins and character. Viewed in its entirety the ideology is far from attractive. Paul Craig Roberts, for instance, correctly pictures Progressives (liberals) as responsible for driving “God out of the public schools,” making “abortion a moral cause,” destroying “moral standards” and substituting “a non-judgmental ethic,” and undermining “the authority of parents and school teachers” with arcane “governmental regulations.”¹⁸

Clearly an important mission for conservative scholars of this century would be to point out its failing; to indicate concretely where its logic leads. Beyond this, though, conservative scholars are obliged to anticipate the moves of Progressives, not a particularly difficult task once the ideology is laid bare with the relationship between its major elements clarified. We know, for instance, that the family has long been a stumbling block to the efforts of those who seek to level; the fully progressive society, this is to say, is not possible so long as the family unit exists. Consequently we can anticipate an “attack” on the family as an institution. Not a direct attack, for that most surely would fail, but rather an indirect attack with the state moving incrementally over the decades to assume responsibilities that were once well within the province of the family. This will involve pointing out that state authorities can do a much better job than parents in handling various aspects of a child’s upbringing—e.g., that child abuse in families is far too high, that children will learn more in day care centers than in the home with mother.

As a general proposition we know that Progressives will move to remove or discredit all subsidiary groups that might tend to dilute the citizen’s allegiance and commitment to the central government.

In this respect, the Progressivism of the twenty-first century will differ from that of the twentieth only in focus and tactics. What is more, we can expect an assault upon those policies and practices that are at odds with progressive ends. The fragmentation in education with home schooling and charter schools is clearly not to the Progressivists’ liking. Nor is the movement for vouchers that would considerably expand the private sector. With increased ardor, they will ridicule or otherwise try to discredit religious organizations critical of our popular culture and what it has wrought.

But, it may be asked, should the mission of the conservative scholar go beyond simply fending off the assaults of Progressivism? I have frequently heard the argument, for instance, that the basic problem results from the Progressives’ militant secularism, from their having cut themselves off from the transcendent, thereby fostering the insidious relativism that is so pervasive today. If somehow, it is suggested, they could be made to see, or at least come to appreciate the position of those who believe in an ordered moral universe, a common universe of discourse might result. For this reason, perhaps, we have seen in recent decades numerous books and symposia devoted to finding “common ground” between the secular and the religious or to prescribe the appropriate role of each in the modern world.

With regard to these and like efforts, I am extremely pessimistic. We must never forget that we are dealing with an ideology that possesses a powerful attraction; its true believers simply are not going to alter their thought on its essential points. This would be asking them, in effect, to abandon that progressive ideology through which they have come to structure their world.

In sum, to return to my basic concern set forth at the outset, the erosion of our traditional values, the mission of the con-

ervative scholar in this century will be pretty much the same as it was in the last. Progressivism simply will not disappear. Rather, like the alien beast of the movies,

it will assume new forms as conditions warrant. Identifying its disguises, then, will lend sport to the mission.

1. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Indianapolis, 1987), 9. 2. *Reflections*, 33. 3. *Reflections*, 34-5. 4. See, for example, J. L. Talmon's *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (New York, 1960). 5. In this regard I am reminded of Eric Voegelin's analysis of the "dream world" character of "Gnostic" response to the threat of the Soviet Union. If the Progressives—who in my view subscribed to this Gnostic world view—had prevailed, Western civilization might well have suffered a fatal blow. See his *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago, 1952), chapter six. 6. This is not to say that all those advancing enlightenment principles, either in terms of ends or as providing a framework for understanding social reality, are hard-core ideologues. Nor do I mean to say that a small, conspiratorial group is or bears responsibility for the pervasiveness of the progressive ideology. Certainly a large portion of the academic Left in the humanities and social sciences (e.g., the Progressive historians) fits into this hard-core category, often going to excesses in spinning out the "logic" of progressive tenets. Others responsible for spreading or reinforcing the gospel (e.g., the Hollywood community, the media elites) are more likely just fellow travelers who find the lack of any moral center, the spirit of innovation and the like supportive of their life-styles. As such they vigorously advance the creed because it provides the grounds for public displays of compassionate concern, while simultaneously supporting a selective toleration that suits their purposes. But, in the main, it would seem they have a fragmentary knowledge of the ideology, knowing little about its origins and even less about its nature.

The significant point in this regard, though, is that somehow progressive ideals and ends have gained such acceptance that they are unquestioned standards against which societies are measured on a host of matters, both political and social in character. In other terms, the progressive ideology in many respects is like the air we breathe. Just how it attained this status remains a mystery. 7. The success of our Founding Fathers, it should be noted in passing, can be attributed in large measure to the fact that the ideas, concepts, and principles that formed the core of French revolutionary ideology were largely absent from the American political culture when they met to draft a new constitution. That Jefferson was not at the Philadelphia Convention may be counted among our blessings for reasons I point out in the text. It

should also be remarked in this connection that at the very time we had come to a new conception of constitutionalism—i.e., that a constitution represented fundamental laws that could only be altered by an amendment process, not through the political processes of lawmaking set forth in the constitution—Jefferson set forth his doctrine on the "rights" of each generation, a doctrine certainly at odds with the spirit of this newfound constitutionalism. 8. *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, compiler and editor, Merrill D. Peterson (New York, 1984), 963. 9. *Reflections*, 84-5. 10. *Reflections*, 83. 11. William J. Brennan, Jr., "The Constitution of the United States: Contemporary Ratification," in *Interpreting the Constitution*, ed. Jack N. Rakove (Boston, 1990), 29. 12. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 303. 13. Vermont's Act 60, passed in 1998 and designed to provide a substantially equal education for all its school children, is the epitome of Progressivism. First, it resulted from a decision of the Supreme Court of Vermont, which performed an act of judicial creativity by reading into the Vermont Constitution the educational equality requirement. Second, Act 60 centralizes the collection of revenue derived from the property tax, relieving the towns of this function. Third, the act mandates an equal expenditure per pupil in all towns. Towns that might want to spend more per pupil through higher property taxes are severely penalized; in a typical situation, only one dollar in four would go to the school district. The other three would go to the state for distribution to less advantaged school districts.

Whether ways around this measure such as the establishment of private schools and foundation grants will be closed off remains to be seen. One measure was introduced in the Vermont legislature that would severely restrict private gifts to public schools. 14. *Reflections*, 43. 15. Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York, 1909), 43. 16. *Reflections*, 79. 17. *Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 U.S. 1 (1947). In his majority opinion Justice Black looks to Jefferson as providing an understanding of the intent of those who drafted the religion clauses of the First Amendment. The absurdity of this is evident to anyone with any familiarity of the period. 18. Roberts was writing about the diagnoses being offered for the Littleton, Colorado, shootout. "Reaping a deadly harvest," *The Washington Times*, April 26, 1999, page A19.

The Scholar as Borrower and Lender of the Truth of Things

Marion Montgomery

Polonius: "What do you read, my lord?"
Hamlet: "Words, words, words."

I

AT THIS TURNING OF A MILLENNIUM it is both a difficult and a dangerous undertaking to use signs, most especially to attempt wise words suited to the recovery and sharing of what T. S. Eliot called "The Permanent Things" necessary to community. Difficult, because our signs are decayed by indifference to or deliberate misuse of them. Symptom to the point: only the "sound-bite" passes as currency in the commerce of the "global village." The speculator in signs feels forced to bright facility at the expense of reflective economy. He is expected to be as quick-witted as an Oscar Wilde, whatever purchase involved: whether as poet or as philosopher, but most certainly as politician. That is why the "media expert" is the chief expense in political campaigns, to sell a program or elect a candidate to a public authority over programs. Ours has become an age demanding instant communication of words suited to arresting feeling, out of a gradual condi-

tioning of public expectations which have set thought aside from feeling. How little we seem to notice that the clever word is in this moment epigraph but decays into this moment's epitaph the moment passed. Such is the intellectual climate of our dissolving community with which the scholar now, and tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, must contend.

If in this climate the task of bearing witness to the truth of things is difficult, it is even more so dangerous to the bearer of signs, to the scholar whose offices are those of both poet and philosopher. It is dangerous to him in relation to a primary responsibility to his own integrity as person—as an intellectual soul incarnate. In pursuing this responsibility, in literature and philosophy, I have more and more been concerned with signs as touching upon truth beyond the reaches of zip codes or e-mail stations, beyond scholarly journals and books. No wonder, then, that I approach this present responsibility, to bear cryptic witness out of fifty years in the academy, with fear and trembling. What may I say to the "Conservative Scholar" who finds himself inheritor of responsibilities to signs in the "Twenty-First Century"?

I remember Nestor two millennia (almost) ago, garrulous beyond his several wars in the midst of yet another one, regaling impatient Greek warriors in their

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