

Small talk has always had its place beside great events in long-distance communication.

Kenneth Silverman, the author of a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Cotton Mather, tells the life of Morse (1791–1872) through many such precise and contrasting details. The inventor was born outside Boston to a stout, no-nonsense mother and a father who preferred mapmaking to his work as a minister. As a young man, Morse, too, divided his time between two pursuits, tinkering with inventions and painting portraits.

His results in both were mixed. A prototype fire engine failed in a public demonstration, prompting one spectator to write: “Mr Morse better stick to his brush, *he will do well enough then* but as to Engines he’d better let them alone.” Morse did become a prosperous artist, but when his most ambitious, meticulously detailed works failed to establish him as a serious painter, he decided to concentrate on the inventions, including an idea for a long-distance communications device. One way or another, he felt sure, greatness was his destiny.

In 1837, Morse read a newspaper article about two French inventors working on a concept that he had thought existed solely in his notes. Alarmed, he retraced his steps, even going so far as to write to fellow passengers on a transatlantic crossing he had made in 1832, some of whom responded that, yes, they recalled his having talked of his telegraph notion. Along with establishing his primacy, he was struggling to figure out



*Samuel F. B. Morse and his family, c. 1809*

where the idea might have slid from his fingers—an example of what might be Morse’s real curse, a personality given to obsessing over both detail and reputation. He spent the rest of his life locked in a grudge match with other inventors over telegraph patents, funding, and fame.

Through Silverman’s curatorial eye, Morse’s story shifts from sweetness (the feckless young painter) to tragedy (his artistic projects fail, his young wife dies, his paternity claim to his greatest invention is called spurious), and finally to irony (xenophobic Morse promotes the idea of a transatlantic cable). Along the way, the biographer capably explores such topics as intellectual property rules, early-19th-century tastes in art, government funding of commercial projects, and the vagaries of electric communication. The book is a triumph for Silverman and his readers, as well as, belatedly, for Morse.

—ALEXANDER CHEE

## HISTORY

**TOMMY THE CORK:**  
*Washington’s Ultimate Insider,*  
*from Roosevelt to Reagan.*

By David McKean. Steerforth. 347 pp.  
\$25

It’s likely that every great capital city, at least every one with some form of representative government, attracts legions of ambi-

tious, well-motivated, politically adept young people eager to play parts on the political stage. Some of them succeed, to the lasting benefit of their nation. Unfortunately, the mixture of money, power, and malleable laws that is characteristic of capitals also draws fixers—clever operators who ignore many of the ethical rules that governments

and the legal profession adopt in the interest of fair play.

Lawyer Thomas Corcoran (1900–81) exemplified both types of capital citizen. “Tommy the Cork,” as Franklin Roosevelt called him (just as the two George Bushes surely would have), was arguably one of the half-dozen most significant architects of the New Deal, a dynamo of energy, intellectual versatility, and personal magnetism who found roles for hundreds of other bright young lawyers and economists in the proliferating federal agencies around Washington. “[Felix] Frankfurter sent me to Corcoran, which was the classic way to get a job in the New Deal,” wrote one such recruit.

But installing his fellow Harvard Law graduates in federal jobs was peripheral to Corcoran’s main interest: drafting and lobbying through Congress some of the seminal legislation of the 1930s. He and his brilliant friend Benjamin Cohen wrote the Securities and Exchange Act and the Public Utilities Holding Company Act—monumental New Deal efforts to bring order to the stock markets and the electric power industry.

Corcoran did everything from lobbying FDR’s doomed court-packing plan to writing the famous sentence “This generation has a rendezvous with destiny” in a Roosevelt speech. Once, seeking to help his admirer Sam Rayburn, he made use of his friendships in the Coast Guard to race out to an ocean liner approaching New York harbor so that he might tell the returning Democratic national chairman, Jim Farley, that Rayburn was the president’s choice for Speaker of the House. Thus Corcoran bested New York’s Democratic bosses, who were waiting at the pier to lobby Farley on behalf of a Rayburn rival.

These remarkable adventures are



President Franklin D. Roosevelt presents a pen to Thomas Corcoran after signing the Public Utility Holding Company Act in 1935.

detailed in David McKean’s superb biography, *Tommy the Cork*. McKean is chief of staff for Senator John Kerry and the coauthor of *Friends in High Places* (1995), the tale of another master manipulator, Clark Clifford. His material here is drawn not only from written sources but from many interviews with those who watched Corcoran charm and out-think several generations of people who had business in Washington.

Inevitably Corcoran made enemies, and, perhaps also inevitably, he began working his magic not for noble public purposes but for an array of private law clients, including several rather questionable interests, after he left government and became a lobbyist in 1941. With a growing family, he wished to make money; perhaps more important, he savored his own adroitness and relished using the network he had fashioned in his New Deal days. Winning the game was what mattered. What uniform he was wearing became increasingly unimportant.

In this, Corcoran seems somewhat like the great courtroom lawyer Edward Bennett Williams. In his long career, Williams represented a regiment of rogues, including Joe McCarthy, Jimmy Hoffa, Frank Costello, and Bobby Baker. The more con-

ventionally odious his client, the more zestful Williams's enthusiasm seemed. Watch me spring this guy, he seemed to be saying—this is going to take brains and bravado.

One difference between Williams and Corcoran lay in the arenas in which they worked. As a trial lawyer, Williams was a combatant whose foe was there to watch his every move. Corcoran operated *ex parte*, even to the point of approaching Supreme Court justices—some of whom may be said to have owed him their positions—in their chambers, urging them to reconsider a motion. That this could have earned him disbarment seems not to have seriously concerned him. He was in the game, and this was a play that might win it.

The life and adventures of Tommy the Cork, from serving as a clerk to Oliver Wendell Holmes to helping United Fruit find ways to overthrow the government of Guatemala, make for one of the most intriguing Washington books in years. Readers with a taste for the politically picaresque will seize upon it with delight.

—HARRY MCPHERSON

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**THE NORMAN PODHORETZ  
READER:**

***A Selection of His Writings from the  
1950s through the 1990s.***

Edited by Thomas L. Jeffers. Free Press.  
478 pp. \$35

Described by Paul Johnson in the introduction to this collection as “the archetype of the New York intellectual,” Norman Podhoretz has enjoyed a career as varied as it has been long and distinguished. In addition to his 35 years as editor of *Commentary*, he has achieved prominence (or notoriety) as a literary critic and prolific memoirist. As a young man, he courted fame and flirted with radicalism; in old age, he reinvented himself as an exegete, recently publishing a book on the Hebrew prophets. Throughout, Podhoretz has remained a patriot, a fierce anticommunist, and, since the 1960s, a relentless combatant in the culture wars.

This hefty tome, a five-decade sampler

of Podhoretz's writings, provides a useful opportunity to take stock of his career and achievements. The book touches on all of the abiding preoccupations of Podhoretz's life: literature, totalitarianism, anti-Semitism, the well-being of Israel, the frequent dishonesty and fecklessness of his fellow intellectuals, and the dangers of anything suggesting appeasement, isolationism, or pusillanimity in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy.

Because Podhoretz is above all a sophisticated polemicist, the result makes for consistently lively reading. There is much here of lasting value. Yet the collection as a whole lacks balance and ultimately disappoints.

As an avowed enemy of the New Left and all its works, Podhoretz wielded his greatest influence in the years after the Vietnam War, when American politics and culture were still acutely afflicted with the fevers of the 1960s. Somewhat surprisingly, the book slights that phase of his career, offering only two essays from the 1970s. By contrast, the 1990s, a decade when ideological fevers had largely subsided (or perhaps migrated to the Right), are accorded 10 pieces, six from 1999 alone. Instead of inviting an evaluation of the man in full, *The Norman Podhoretz Reader* offers a somewhat skewed version of his intellectual legacy.

This is unfortunate. However insightful his reflections on Mark Twain, Saul Bellow, Ralph Ellison, and Norman Mailer (all included here), Podhoretz matters because of his contribution to the reshaping of American politics after Vietnam. One of neoconservatism's most influential exponents, he helped create the conditions that elevated Ronald Reagan to the White House, revived American power, and eventually ended the Cold War on terms favorable to the United States.

Though this book includes Podhoretz's “eulogy” for his movement, neoconservatism did not expire with the Cold War. Instead, it today provides the impetus and intellectual justification for policies—the war in Iraq not least among them—that much of the world and more than a few Americans have come to view with dis-