

Thomas Frank. *The Wrecking Crew: How Conservatives Rule*. (Henry Holt and Company, 2008), pp. 384. \$25.00. ISBN-13: 978-0805079883

**Wall Street Journal** columnist **Thomas Frank's** *What's the Matter with Kansas?* was one of 2004's more commented-upon political commentaries. Frank drew considerable praise from liberals and considerable disdain from conservatives for his argument that the voters of Kansas' embrace of cultural conservatism worked directly to their economic detriment. Frank's second book, *The Wrecking Crew: How Conservatives Rule*, attacks conservatives from a different direction but with the same lively polemical style, and will likely provoke a similar response from partisans of both ends of the ideological spectrum.

Where Frank's first book looks at the consequences of Republican's "favor-the-rich" governing style in his home state, his second takes the reader into the nation's capital for a look at how Republicans govern at the national level. Frank contends that the transformation of Washington D.C. from a predominantly middle-class community initially populated by New Deal-era bureaucrats to one of opulent homes peopled by wealthy lobbyists serves as a telling metaphor of the aspirations of contemporary conservatives.

The book is divided into two sections. Part One is devoted to detailing the insurgent attitude that has emerged as the dominant organizing tendency among today's conservatives. Frank catalogues in considerable detail the steady rightward drift of conservative ideology toward an increasingly radical utopian vision that involved elimination or emasculating of the federal regulatory state, and a return to a more

purely *laissez faire* state. In order to justify this anti-government advocacy, Frank argues that modern-day conservatives have embraced a cynical anti-government rhetoric that puts Republicans in the ironic position of seeking election to government in order to undermine government, a kind of “We had to destroy the village in order to save it” rationale that Frank believes is absurd when stripped of its ideological trappings. Frank is at his satirical height in describing the rise of conservatives like Jack Abramoff, Grover Norquist, and Lee Atwater through the ranks of the College Republicans to positions of unique power and authority within the Republican ideological hierarchy, and their role in several fairly bizarre episodes in the 1980’s, including the attempted divination of Angola’s ruthless Jonas Savimbi and the right’s passionate and (perhaps) money-driven embrace of the racist apartheid regime in South Africa.

Part Two focuses on how Republicans have tended to govern as the majority party over the past 30 years. At the heart of Frank’s indictment of conservatism is not conservatism per se, but rather that modern conservatism has been largely driven by a corporate ideology. Frank cites a 1929 article by defense contractor Homer Ferguson, whose “A Plea for Inefficiency in Government” reached the paradoxical conclusion that the “The best public servant is the worst one... If public officials are and remain inefficient, the public will sicken of incompetence and rely exclusively upon corporate enterprise” (p. 129). People who have internalized such a view of government see nothing wrong with Defense Department procurement executives handing out huge contracts to defense contractors and then leaving public service to take a job with that same corporation, or in hiring former lobbyists from the coal industry to run the regulatory office at the Department of the Interior.

Lobbyists do not fare well in Frank’s critical narrative of the conservative governing style. In a chapter entitled “City of Bought Men,” Frank writes with zealous derision of the lobbying community that has proliferated in Washington since the 2000 election:

With a little practice, the pressure boys are easy to distinguish from lesser drones: they are the ones who look like caricatures of prosperous men, dressed in a way that is no doubt meant to suggest “affluent businessman” but in which no proper businessman in Chicago or Kansas City would ever, in fact,

dress himself. In most of the United States, male office-wear tends toward the drab; the lobbyist, by contrast, fancies himself Beau Brummell. He appears to choose each element of his ensemble for its conspicuous priciness, and you can spot him in the field by his perfectly fitted thousand-dollar suits, usually blue; his strangely dainty shoes; his shirts, which often come in pink or blue with white collars and cuts, the latter of which display cufflinks of the large and shiny variety; his vivid, shimmering ties, these days preferably in orange or lavender; his perfect haircut; his perfect tan; the tiny flag attesting to his perfect patriotism on his perfect lapel (p. 176).

Frank highlights the innately corrupting role that lobbying has played in American politics, citing a 1874 Supreme Court case in which one justice declared that the public would instinctively find both lobbyists and their employers as “steeped in corruption and the employment as infamous” (p. 179). Frank tellingly describes the centrality of lobbying within the Republican hierarchy as an exemplification of the party’s subordination to business imperatives. As Frank tellingly describes it, lobbying “is how money casts its vote” (p. 175), and reading the *Washington Post*’s investigative series on the rise of the lobbying industry made him “want to curl up with a bottle of scotch, set the Sex Pistols on infinite repeat, and forget this city of bought men” (p. 182).

The ultimate target of Frank’s ire is less conservative venality and incompetence than the sins of an untrammelled marketplace. In Frank’s view, the horrors visited upon immigrant labors on the American territories of the Marianas were predictable because it “was simply the market doing what the market will always do, should it somehow get loose from the political cage.” “The animal is predictable,” Frank continues, “It will bid wages down and push profits up by any means it is permitted to use” (pp. 219-220). In the end, Frank argues that the conservative “marketization” of politics has left our government with all of the sins of capitalism and none of its virtues.

Some might want to dismiss Thomas Frank as nothing more than the left’s answer to conservative polemicists like Ann Coulter, Sean Hannity, or Bill O’Reilly. Such criticisms do a disservice to Frank, whose satirical talent exists at a higher level than contemporary conservative

polemicists. P.J. O'Rourke would seem to offer a more appropriate comparison. Likewise, Frank's research appears much more solid and substantial than the sketchy referencing efforts of less talented conservative hacks. Polemical though he may be, Frank is a very talented writer, and consequently should be taken seriously by critics and advocates alike. The current economic troubles may, in fact, provide Frank's second book with an even larger audience than his first. Given Oklahoma's growing embrace of the Republican Party, and in light of the Oklahoma's scandal-prone political environment, Oklahomans of all political persuasions will find valuable lessons in Frank's cautionary tale.

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