

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes #162

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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
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Global Summit “Week Two”

A look at AI and the human future, ‘What’s Wrong with the Boys?’ and A 5-time Jeopardy Champion



Global Summit XV got off to a rousing start this week and the speaker series will continue next week with another stellar cast of presenters starting Sunday evening at 7:30 in Gannon University's Yehl Ballroom at the Waldron Campus

Center, 124 W. Seventh St. CNN commentator David Urban will discuss “2024: Politics, Pennsylvania, The Status of the GOP, and ‘the Race.’”

In that same Week Two, you’ll also want to hear Della Clark speaking on “Promoting Racial and Economic Equity: Ways to Lead Community Relations” (Wednesday, Nov. 1, Waldron, 7:30 p.m.). But in this week’s **Book Note** of “Notes,” I want to take a closer look at three other speakers: Richard Lesser, Richard Reeves, and Tom Nichols.



“This seems like the sort of art project we can foist off on A.I.”

NOTE #1: As regular readers of these “Notes” know, artificial intelligence (AI) has been an interest of mine for the past several years. Almost 15 years ago, I became deeply interested in artificial intelligence’s potential impact upon education, in particular certain learning tools’ ability to supplement, if not supplant, human tutors in assisting

students to master subjects both basic and difficult. At the time, no one seriously considered that the programmed “tutor” was “thinking” as it worked with students or worried that it might mislead them with false information or guidance. Most educators thought its chief virtue was its limitless patience as it helped struggling students grappling with topics both banal and arcane.

Then, returning to Erie almost 10 years ago, I continued my exploration of AI by reading books such as ***The Second Machine Age***, ***The Second Intelligent Species***, ***Rise of the Robots***, a special ***Foreign Affairs*** journal issue on “The Fourth Industrial Revolution,” and Kevin Kelly’s now dated but prophetic ***The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces That Will Shape Our Future***. That future is now here in the – hmm, in the *what: person, presence, _____?* – let’s say in the *presence* of ChatGPT4 and other large language model “chat” systems that seem to pass the Turing Test “thinking” if not like humans then in an eerily similar fashion provoking all sorts of speculation about AI and the human future. I wrote several **Book Notes** on the topic earlier this year that can be found here.

As my editors Pat Cuneo and Ben Speggen must certainly be thinking by now – “Andy, you’re burying the *lead*.” This is all by way of introducing next Monday’s Global Summit XV speaker Richard Lesser. Lesser, the son of Ed Lesser, retired executive director of the Erie County Council of Governments, and the stepson of Mary Ellen Dahlkemper, retired president of Mercyhurst Prep, is the global chairman of Boston Consulting Group (BCG):

He previously served as BCG's CEO from 2013-2021, a period of exceptional growth for the firm across all regions and practice areas. During his tenure as CEO, Rich oversaw the launch of BCG Digital Ventures, a builder and accelerator of digital businesses; BCG GAMMA, a cutting-edge advanced analytics, machine-learning and AI team; BCG TURN, a rapid performance acceleration unit; and the BCG Center for Climate & Sustainability. As CEO, Rich initiated BCG's pledge to reach net zero climate impact by 2030." [1]



For the uninitiated, along with McKinsey and Bain, the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) is among the world's three largest management consulting firms. Beginning with its founder Bruce Henderson's focus on "strategy," BCG "ignited a revolution that would transform business management forever." [2] In particular, BCG's Growth Share Matrix, a conceptually simple but powerful analytic tool, revolutionized how organizations prioritize their different businesses. It dominated business thinking in the

1970s and is still a key tool in teaching business strategy. [3] I won't explain it to you now, but when in a previous life as a senior college/university administrator I used it to explain institutional growth strategy, it had the split personality effect of convincing trustee-types that I knew what I was talking about while infuriating some faculty.

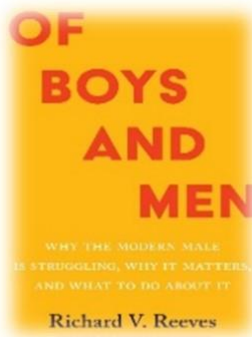


I rather doubt Lesser will spend much time Monday night on BCG's Growth Share Matrix as he discusses "Artificial Intelligence, the Environment, and Resiliency: Focus and Priorities for Leadership Today, Tomorrow." Regardless, I'll be very interested in hearing how he weaves together these three topics, all central to our current discontents whose resolution is crucial for our common future. Is artificial intelligence an existential threat to humanity's future, or is it a powerful new tool which if strategically deployed can help us solve vexing issues, both ancient and modern? In the realm of the

ancient, can AI help humans finally live according to their most common religious/ethical teaching – "Do unto others as you would have them to unto you?" Or, in the hands of the egoistic and nefarious, will it lead us into some post-human dystopia even George Orwell couldn't conjure?

Is climate change “real” (which some still deny), and if it is, can AI help us strategize a path forward? At the risk of irreverence, in the short term, climate change seems a boon to Erie and the Great Lakes region – milder winters and longer growing seasons in a region flush with fresh water – but in the longer term is that a mirage? And speaking of the longer term, will we – which is to say not only Erieites but humans more generally, have the grit, the resilience to stay the course and to do what needs doing? In our hyper-kinetic world of Tik-Tok attention spans, resilience is a virtue increasingly noted by its absence. Yet, it remains the single most important characteristic of winners and those who not only succeed but thrive. I’ve often told students and others that the single most important characteristic of the successful (in addition to the courage to simply try, to take a chance) is persistence. As many a motivational poster and internet meme exhorts, often victory comes “to those who simply keep on running.”

For what I am sure will be a most insightful evening, come to the Yehl Ballroom at Gannon University’s Waldron Center on Monday, Oct. 30 at 7:30 p.m. to hear the BCG’s Richard Lesser discuss “Artificial Intelligence, the Environment, and Resiliency: Focus and Priorities for Leadership Today, Tomorrow.”



NOTE #2: Speaking of AI, ChatGPT4 says of Richard Reeves’ 2022 book *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do About It*: It “delves into the challenges faced by modern males and explores why these struggles are significant for both individuals and society as a whole. Reeves argues that changing social norms, economic shifts, and evolving expectations have led to a crisis in masculinity. He also provides insights and recommendations on how to address these issues.”

[4] Less flaccid and with considerably more verve, author and columnist David Brooks says, “*Of Boys and Men* is a landmark, one of the most important books of the year, not only because it is a comprehensive look at the male crisis, but also because it searches for the roots of that crisis and offers solutions.” [5]

Reeves, a nonresident senior fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution is also president of the American Institute for Boys and Men. Holder of a B.A. from Oxford University and a Ph.D. from Warwick University, in addition to *Of Boys and Men* Reeves other book of note examines America’s growing income inequality in *Dream Hoarders: How the American Upper Middle Class Is Leaving Everyone Else in the Dust, Why That is a Problem, and What to Do About It*. If nothing else, you have to admit that Reeves has mastered the art of the book title as mini-essay. Reeves also wrote a biography of John Stuart Mill, the Victorian apostle of classical liberalism and utilitarianism, a philosophy, which to oversimplify a bit, posited

that the *good* was that which provided the greatest positive benefits to the greatest number of people. In so positing, it avoided the socio-emotional baggage bedeviling many other notions of the *good*, such as those trumpeted by many 21st century culture warriors of both the right and the left.

One of those wars is the troubling status of men in post-modern society. That men are in trouble in 21st century America (and elsewhere) should come as no surprise to anyone paying the least bit of attention, but, particularly among the commentariat and others at or near society's apex, surprise it does.

Why?

Among the highly educated and the economically advantaged, fathers and their sons are doing OK. But, as Reeves takes great pains to detail, men in general are not, with the rural poor and African American males struggling the most. Using copious statistics, Reeves details the many ways in which men in post-agricultural and post-industrial society struggle. As Conor Friedersdorf noted in *The Atlantic*, "Men are struggling in school, in the job market, and in family life; they are the gender most likely to end up in prison and most vulnerable to 'deaths of despair.'" [6] Quoting Reeves, Friedersdorf shares Reeves's data that in the U.S., "the 2020 decline in college enrollment was seven times greater for male than for female students. ...among men with only a high school education, one in three is out of the labor force. For those who have a job, typical earnings are \$881 a week, down from \$1,017 in 1979 ... mortality from drug overdoses, suicides, and alcohol-related illnesses ... are almost three times higher among men than women." [7]



One of the reasons the problems of men and boys go partially undiscussed in our culture war riven times is that simply raising the issue excites the hackles of those from all points on the socio-political spectrum. As Reeves himself says, "In our current political climate, highlighting the problems of boys and men is seen as a perilous undertaking." [8] Reeves is at some pains to explain that his interest in the problems of boys and men is not an abandonment of his concern for the welfare and rights of girls and women. He points out that one of his solutions is "a more equal allocation of childcare, helped by generous paid leave for both mothers and fathers." [9] He also advocates making jobs "fairer for women while reforming schools to be fairer to boys." Because, as he continues, "we can hold two thoughts in our head at once. We can be passionate about women's rights and compassionate toward vulnerable boys and men." [10]

It's a sentiment with which Michelle Goldberg of The New York Times agrees in her article "Boys and Men Are in Crisis Because Society Is." She says, "It's possible to believe that sexism remains a major impediment to women's flourishing and also believe that for many boys and men life is much harder than it should be. ... Even if you're not inclined to care much about men's welfare, their growing anomie and resentment is everyone's problem, fueling right-wing populist movements around the world." [11]

Our social responsibility for dealing with the problems of boys and men requires mention because partisans of both the right and the left get it wrong. Partisans on the left, denying that there is any biological basis for sex differences, see the problem in a curiously conservative fashion as an individual failing; i.e., that males have failed to adapt their behavior to new realities requiring them to develop their softer more nurturing capacities. While on the right, the answer is to encourage males to buckle up and reassert traditional male virtues of physical strength and resoluteness. The answer, of course, lies in the middle, which, as always, is a treacherous place.

One of the weaknesses of Reeves book is his vague centrist solution – perhaps because neither he nor anyone else has figured out how to define and how to navigate that middle. But he does have a number of positive suggestions society needs to pursue to enhance the wellbeing of boys and men. In particular, how to make the school system more "boy friendly."

Aside: I, for one, would like to know who the "genius" was who decided "recess" wasn't necessary and that it would be all right to have young boys, brimming with excess energy, confined to a classroom for six or seven hours per day. I'm guessing that it was some timid administrator reviewing insurance premiums and worrying about liability on the playground and in the gym.

But I digress.

Reeves makes a number of plausible suggestions. Nodding first to the left and then to the right, he suggests that we need to redefine masculinity to allow for a broader range of emotional expression and vulnerability; to increase support for fathers, like the family leave mentioned earlier; to be more aware of male needs for mental health awareness, greater economic stability, and fatherhood and parenting programs. Particularly striking is his suggestion that men need to be encouraged to pursue careers in what he calls the HEAL professions – health, education, administration, and literacy.

Reeves' idea with the most resonance is to "red shirt" boys. [12] The sports culture phrase means to hold young athletes back a year so they can gain in maturity to be better able to compete. Since it is well documented that boys mature at a slower rate than girls, that they should be held back a year at the

very beginning of schooling makes a great deal of sense. I can hear the howls already; I am not going to delve into the data, but simply appeal to one's common-sense observations – boys lag girls in emotional maturity. I'm not sure when they catch up; speaking only for myself, it was rather later than would have proven optimal under other circumstances. Still, it's an idea with such obvious virtue that many parents have quietly adopted it on their own.

So, for a lively treatment of the challenges of boys and men in our society and why it is in everyone's common interest – everyone's *common cause* to bring back an old phrase – to attempt to ameliorate if not fix the issue, listen to Richard Reeves next Tuesday, Oct. 31 at 7:30 p.m. in Gannon University's Yehl Ballroom at Waldron Campus Center, 124 W. Seventh St..

NOTE #3: Once upon a time I was a *Jeopardy!* aficionado, but answering all the questions playing *Trivial Pursuit* made me a social pariah. So, I learned to button my lip, gave up the pursuit, and, in the words of Mae West, "I drifted" away. Still, when you tell me someone is a five-time *Jeopardy!* Champion, I take note.



On Thursday, Nov. 2, Tom Nichols will take center stage. He is a professor at the U.S. Naval War College, an author, a contributing writer at The Atlantic, author of its "The Atlantic DAILY Newsletter," and a five-time *Jeopardy!* champion. A member of the Republican Party, although he could barely abide her, he supported Hilary Clinton for president in 2016 because he thought Donald Trump was mentally unfit to be commander in chief. Nichols is a staunch "Never Trumper," as he detailed in a lengthy article in The New York Times in July 2016, "Never-Trump Confidential." In that 2016 article, in the light of the recent (October 2023) shenanigans in the House of Representatives as Republicans demonstrate that they are incapable of even the rudiments of governing as opposed to performative political opportunism, he made an extremely prescient comment about the future of the Republican Party when he said, "For some time, I'd been concerned that the party was heading into a dead end of largely symbolic extremism." [13]

And who is to say he is wrong?

Confession time – I am coming to Nichols late, but after a woman whose opinion I respect commented at book group to which I belong that Nichols was a particular favorite of hers, I began to read his articles in The Atlantic with attention. Two recent ones especially snagged my notice. On Friday, Oct. 13, – how apt: Friday the 13th – Nichols asserted in The Atlantic DAILY newsletter:

Most of America's current political environment can be traced back to one moment: the election of Donald Trump. The bedlam continues – and, to understand the stakes in 2024, imagine how different the world would look if he'd lost. [14]

In an exercise in counterfactual history – the asking of “*what ifs*” to better understand “*what is*” – Nichols proceeds to identify all the ways in which the United States and its people would be better off if Trump had lost. He first points out that contrary to some other post-mortems of the 2016 presidential election, the result was not foreordained. Yes, as Heather Cox Richardson has pointed out, it was in some ways the result of long-term trends [15], but Nichols believes it was a “fluke, a perfect storm with epochal consequences.” [16]

Had Clinton won, politics would have continued along in all its culture war riven ways, but a Clinton victory would have “let other Republicans avoid sinking in the populist swamp ...and stayed in something like a center-right lane ... perhaps a Trump loss would have prevented ... the normalization of violence and authoritarianism in American politics. ... But no one should wish for the Guardian of Forever to open a gate back to 2016 more than Trump himself. Had he lost, he could have fulfilled what was likely his true wish, to go back to his life in New York as a faux-capitalist fraudster while traveling the country as a pretend president, holding rallies and raking in money from credulous rubes. Instead, he faces humiliation, financial failure, and criminal indictments.” [17]

In a similar vein, Nichols comments in The Atlantic DAILY for October 18 on the recent failure of the Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives to elect a speaker of the House:

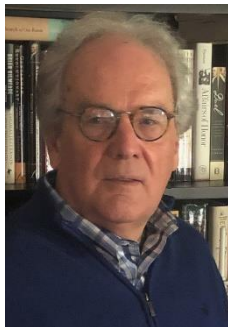
Like many Americans, I have been both fascinated and horrified by the inability of the Republican majority to elect a new speaker of the House. I admit to watching the votes like I'm rubbernecking at a car wreck, but perhaps that's not a good analogy, because I at least feel pity for the victims of a traffic accident. What's happening in the House is more like watching a group of obnoxious (and not very bright) hot-rodders playing chicken and smashing their cars into one another over and over. [18]

If Nichols is center-right (for Erieites a sort of “Tom Ridge Republican”), I am center-left, but I find his frank and witty comments energizing in their aptness, in their punch, and in their ability to clarify convoluted issues. The fact of the matter is that the current Freedom Caucus in the U.S. House of Representatives repeatedly demonstrates that it is not an institutionalist group and would fail my (and I think Nichols') three-question, baseline test of one's worthiness to govern our great land: 1) Do you believe in the American Creed – the second paragraph of The Declaration of Independence – “We hold these truths ...”; 2) Do you honor the Constitution of the United States, its foundational values and its Bill

of Rights and subsequent jurisprudence? And, 3) Do you believe in the rule of law?

It's a measure of how far our politics have fallen since 2016 that those are now questions that need to be asked of any politico seeking your vote.

I need to read and report back to you in future **Book Notes** on two of Nichols' books: ***The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters*** (2017) and ***Our Own Worst Enemy: The Assault From Within on Modern Democracy*** (2021). In the meantime, you can join me and others on Thursday, Nov. 2 at 7:30 p.m. at Gannon University's Yehl Ballroom at Waldron Campus Center, 124 W. Seventh St., to hear more from Tom Nichols.



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"Of Boys and Men" jacket cover at **Brookings Institution Press** available [here](#) accessed October 16, 2023.
"Richard Reeves" at **Brookings Institution** available [here](#) accessed October 16, 2023.
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End Notes

1. "Richard Lesser profile" at **LinkedIn** available here accessed October 21, 2023.
2. "The History of the Boston Consulting Group" at **BCG: Our History** available [here](#) accessed October 21, 2023.
3. "What Is the Growth Share Matrix" at **BCG: Our History** available [here](#) accessed October 21, 2023.
4. "ChatGPT4 on Reeves 'Of Boys and Men'" from Andrew Roth's personal account at **OpenAI** not publicly available.
5. Brooks, David, "The Crisis of Men and Boys," **The New York Times** (Sept. 29, 2022) available [here](#) accessed October 21, 2023.
6. Friedersdorf, Conor, "The Trouble With Boys and Men," **The Atlantic** (October 5, 2022) available [here](#) accessed October 21, 2023.

7. Ibid.
8. Reeves, Richard. *Of Boys and Men: Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What To Do About It*. (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2022 Kindle Edition), p. 2.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Goldberg, Michelle, "Boys and Men Are in Crisis Because Society Is," **The New York Times** (Oct. 3, 2022) available [here](#) accessed October 21, 2023.
12. Cf. Reeves **cited above**, Chapter 10: Redshirt the Boys, p. 133.
13. Nichols, Tom, "Never-Trump Confidential," **The New York Times** (July 18, 2016) available [here](#) accessed October 21, 2023.
14. Nichols, Tom, "A Single Day" in **The Atlantic DAILY** (October 13, 2023) an email distributed to subscribers by The Atlantic accessed October 21, 2023.
15. Cf. Heather Cox Richardson, **Democracy Awakening: Notes on the State of America** (New York: Viking, 2023) which will be the subject of a future **Book Note**.
16. Nichols, "A Single Day," **cited above**.
17. Ibid.
18. Nichols, Tom, "A Single Day" in **The Atlantic DAILY** (October 18, 2023) an email distributed to subscribers by The Atlantic accessed October 21, 2023.

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