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Hill Draws Unlikely Parallels between America, England, Russia

Global Summit 2022 & Book Notes

As I mentioned last week, over the course of the Global Summit we'll be reprising some classic **Book Notes** and offering commentary on several speaker's books. Last week we looked at Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy's ***Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin***. Today, examining Hill's ***There Is Nothing for You Here: Finding Opportunity in the 21st Century***, we'll learn about her concern for America's future as she sees disconcerting similarities evolving in the United States to her experience growing up in the northeast of England. On November 3, we'll discuss Jay Cost's ***A Republic No More*** and his ***James Madison: America's First Politician***. On December 8, I'll share with you my thoughts on John Dickerson's ***The Hardest Job In the World: The American Presidency***.

Fiona Hill will be speaking at Global Summit 2022 at 7 p.m. Friday, November 4 at Gannon University's Highmark Events Center, 620 Peach St. The entire Global Summit schedule of events can be found here. For

California readers, the Global Summit schedule in Redlands can be found [here](#).

– *Andy Roth*



Fiona Hill

Last week in ***Book Notes*** #119, we noted that Fiona Hill’s biography at the Brookings Institution identifies her as a senior fellow on the United States and Europe. She served Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump as a deputy assistant. She was President Trump’s senior director for European and Russian affairs on the National Security Council from 2017-2019.” [1] Even more interesting is the story of how Hill, who testified against President Trump in his first impeachment trial, earned, as Julian Borger said in ***The Guardian***, a Trumpian backhanded compliment. Trump, upon hearing that Hill was publishing a memoir, dismissed his former Russia adviser as “a deep state stiff with a nice accent.” As Borger relates, it prompted “one of Hill’s friends to have it printed on a T-shirt as a gift.” [2]

So, who is Fiona Hill and how did she get to be President Trump’s Russia expert on the National Security Council?

In answering that question, in her ***There Is Nothing for You Here: Finding Opportunity in the Twenty-First Century***, Hill poses and answers two other questions.

First, is “Russia America’s Ghost of Christmas Future”? [3] To which Hill answers, “*Maybe*” if Americans don’t heal their political polarization and begin to meaningfully address the core issues that have created our current cultural divide.

And, in a stunning rebuke to notions of American exceptionalism, Hill describes that cultural divide with great precision as she asks what do Great Britain (actually, more specifically, England), Russia in the 1990s, and the United States share in common? To any attentive reader’s discomfort, as she tells the

remarkable story of her journey from a poor coal miner's daughter in northeast England to Harvard Ph.D. and adviser to three American presidents, Hill answers that America, Great Britain, and Russia have more in common than one might casually think.

Hill tells her story in four segments: "The Coal House," "A Divided House," "The White House," and "Our House." In the first, she describes her experience growing up in Bishop Auckland in County Durham in England's northeast. England's northeast is (or was) coal country. It gave the word redundancy its most apt cliché: "that's like taking coals to New Castle." The region bears stark similarities to America's northeastern Pennsylvania and all of West Virginia. Hill's hometown of Bishop Auckland was once a vibrant coal mining town, but after the Margaret Thatcher-driven extinction of the British coal industry in the 1980s, it is now a hollowed-out shell of itself. It was her father Alf, a former coal miner now working as a hospital orderly, who gave her the book's title's mordant but apt advice: "there is nothing for you here." Taking her father's advice to heart, Hill details her dedication to academic achievement in a socially stratified educational system stacked against her.

In Part Two, a "Divided House," Hill explains how she escaped Bishop Auckland's constraints via a scholarship to St. Andrews University, where she studied history and Russia. In this section, Hill describes her shock during a student exchange in Russia at seeing the similarity between the England she experienced in the 1970s and 1980s to Russia's decaying economy during the "shock therapy" of Boris Yeltsin's 1990s attempt to jump from a state-controlled economy to a free-market economy in one, as it turns out, fell swoop. Yeltsin's policy almost "felled," as in killed off, post-Soviet Russia before it even began.

Hill noted two lessons. One, that it was these failed economic policies of the 1990s that enabled the rise of KGB operative Vladimir Putin. Secondly, that Putin's rise was fueled by an uncannily similar upswelling of neo-populist revulsion among the Russian people to that which spurred British politics leading to Brexit. Populism emerges among those left behind by economic and cultural transitions driven by technological and demographic changes.

Ironically, in both capitalist Britain and the formerly communist Russia, those changes were driven by the "shock therapy" of, in England's case, Margaret Thatcher and her minions re-asserting a purist approach to a market economy, and in Russia's case the introduction of such an economic agenda in the absence of any cultural understanding of how it worked. In England, people like Hill's father and the displaced coal miners and in Russia people accustomed to a society in which their every need was met (usually poorly, if at all, but they were employed even if there was nothing available to purchase with their scant wages) were both

cut adrift without any support. Good luck! They were left to fend for themselves in a world they never made by forces they scarcely understood.

Such abandonment breeds resentment when those abandoned see that suffering is parceled out unequally. Some, with access to education and other advantages, thrive in revitalized urban areas while those in the hinterlands struggle in the wake of progress's wreckage of their towns. In particular, resentment flourishes among the dispossessed who once had status and authority. It is not, as Barbara Walter pointed out in *How Civil Wars Start*, [4] the downtrodden masses who begin civil wars, but those who once had status and resent their diminishment. That resentment fuels the fire of populist anger, which in turn is fed by emergent leaders who say, "Only I can fix this."

Hill's reaction to the America she discovered when she came to Harvard in the late 1980s and early 1990s as a Frank Knox Fellow to study Russian history reminded me of Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*. Brown's autobiography tells the story of a young Black man's experience in Harlem in the 1940s and 1950s. Having escaped the oppression of the racist South as part of the 20th century's Great Migration of African Americans out of the South to refuge and a brighter future in the North, Brown is thrown backwards by the bigotry, discrimination, and other racial insults he suffers in the allegedly "free" North. Discombobulated and on the verge of despair, he asks what is one to do, where is one to go when already in the promised land and the promised land has no promise for you?

Well, Hill never makes that claim. She stayed in America, became an American citizen, and lives here to this day with a genuine love for her adopted country. But she was shocked to realize that the situation she saw in northeast England in her childhood and in the Russia of the 1990s existed in America, too. Post-industrial America, she discovered, also has its hollowed-out towns, its forgotten places with aching people nursing resentment at being left behind and out-of-the-loop in the post-Ronald Reagan America. Hill blames both Reagan's and Thatcher's neo-Darwinian economic policies for most of the travail roiling both British and American culture in the early 21st century. Yes, there were winners, but the resultant inequality has riven both societies.

Just like in England and Russia, Americans left behind resent their abandonment, resent the apparent success of others, resent "their place" in American society being, from their point-of-view, taken over by undeserving others: educated elites, people of color favored by government policies, immigrants taking jobs, and the apparent wealth of urban areas contrasted to the dismal plight of their decaying "flyover" towns. Or, in the case of northwestern Pennsylvania, drive-through towns. For a taste of what Hill sees, drive east on U.S. Route 6 across Pennsylvania's northern tier or New York state's Route 17 across New York's

southern tier. And – double “*and*” – just as in England and Russia, that resentment fueled a populist resurgence aimed at restoring the old order. It has proven easy pickings for ambitious politicians playing to the crowd from the shelter of their sinecures.

I’m not going to steal her thunder, for I expect much of Hill’s Summit talk on November 4 will cover her analysis of this triple-play of populist uprising in the early 21st century as she discusses the rise of Vladimir Putin in St. Petersburg of the 1990s and then as Russian President in the 21st century as he sought (seeks) to “Make Russia Great Again” by a neo-tsarist restoration of Mother Russia; Nigel Farage’s use of northern English resentment to energize the Brexit movement to leave the European Union and restore British pride (“Make Britain Great Again”) giving the Brits, for all their trouble, the decidedly mixed bag of Boris Johnson and Liz Truss; and in America, of course, the usurping of the Republican Party by a New York City real estate developer masquerading as some aberrant combination of tycoon and “everyman.” Donald Trump rose to power promising displaced working people he’d bring back their vanished jobs and “Make America Great Again.”

It’s an old story in America. It goes back at least as far as Father Charles Coughlin’s fascist rantings in the 1930s and Huey Long’s Depression era common man’s fantasies told so well in Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*.

But I’ll let Hill tell that story’s updated version. She does it very well. Her portrait of Donald Trump as the paradoxically egomaniacal narcissist (“Only I can fix this”) and the man-child with a fragile ego in need of constant reassurance sheds no new information. Her firsthand account, however, of his blustering misogyny, utter ignorance of almost all policy matters, fawning admiration of authoritarian leaders who find him a “useful fool,” disdain for those smarter than him who could actually help him, and contempt for staff reveals him for the posturing loser he is so desperate to prove he isn’t. Reading her account, I kept asking myself “Why would anyone work for him?” Thinking about that, I was reminded of the old leadership axiom that “‘A’ people hire ‘A’ people; ‘B’ people hire ‘C’ people” and up and down the organizational chart. Given the caliber of people Trump surrounds himself with, I am not sure where he fits on that scale, but it isn’t as an “A.”

Drawing her book to a close, since she is a policy analyst at Brookings, in true policy wonk fashion Hill’s “Our House” section contains a series of proposals about how America might heal its political and cultural divide. For the most part they are anodyne, which is to say appropriate and right-minded, but being overly general and lacking any roadmap for how they might be politically achieved not of much practical value. Her “Afterword,” however, is precise and pointed. It gives specific advice about how each of us in our various roles can help heal our social

divide. She, for example, says if you are a CEO, you can create mentoring programs, “demonstrate the courage to acknowledge systemic bias,” and “set aggressive hiring targets for women, minorities, and ... those from low income, working-class backgrounds.” [5] If you are retired, “volunteer” and “participate in intragenerational exchanges and collaborations.” [6] I’d like to think that is what I am doing with the Raimy Fellows Program in the Jefferson Civic Leadership Academy. If you are a young professional, “create peer networks,” “maintain ties with alumni networks for college and high school to offer next-steps career guidance”; if you are a college professor or administrator, “open courses virtually to high school students from underprivileged backgrounds to give them a taste for college.” [7]

Hill’s strongest advice, however, is for any individual to take maximum advantage of any educational opportunities they can find. She believes passionately that education is the path out of obscurity, the path out of the world’s Bishop Aucklands, Pennsylvania’s hollowed out Route 6 towns, and America’s urban deserts. It’s hard to deny the accuracy of her appeal, but she leaves unanswered what sort of education she sees as our social panacea. Actually, that is not correct, for she is an unapologetic advocate for elite education and for maximizing access to it for all worthy students regardless of their gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic class. Given her own story, it’s hard to argue with her.

But, maybe not disagree with Hill’s prescription, but I am going to offer a caveat. It is precisely the rise of high-stakes testing, the intensifying channeling of talented students into a smaller and smaller cohort of “elite” institutions that has contributed to America’s cultural malaise and polarized sociopolitical environment. We’ve mentioned this before in **Book Notes #34**, in particular in my comments on Michael Sandel’s excellent ***The Tyranny of Merit: What’s Become of the Common Good***, which can be found here.

I watched it happen over the course of my 50-year career in higher education. Although they have an important role to play, America’s so-called “elite” colleges are part of the problem. I will go a step further and say that the glorification of “college” as the ultimate educational end for all Americans is also a part of the problem. In the interest of full transparency, I have to own a certain amount of responsibility for that, because I was an integral part of leadership teams (**the** leader at two) of three different institutions that pursued some claim to emerging “quasi-elite” quality as if it were an unchallengeable quasi-religious good of uncontested benefit.

At the risk of apostasy, I will say that “college” has been oversold in American culture. The solution to our educational woes and, in part, our cultural divide is to tame our obsession with “college.” If we are going to fix education in America, it is not “college,” or its more mundane synonym “post-secondary” education, that is going to do it. We need to fix K-12 education at each step in that ladder, with a

particular emphasis on grades 11 and 12. As someone who has probably read more than 20,000 high school transcripts, I can say with some non-statistical certainty that the senior year in high school is now essentially worthless. I'm not the first to say that. Leon Botstein did almost 25 years ago in *Jefferson's Children: Education and the Promise of America*. [8]

Well, the role of higher education in American society is too large a topic to tag on at the end of a commentary on Fiona Hill's excellent *There Is No Place for You Here*. We'll take that up in a future series of **Book Notes** on the history of American higher education, its current "over-cooked" status, and what American society's options might be.

For now, I will be interested to hear what Hill has to say about education and the other issues mentioned earlier when she speaks at Global Summit 2022 on November 4 at 7 p.m. at Gannon University's Highmark Events Center. Either before or after, do yourself a favor and read the first two-thirds of her book as she shares with you the amazing tale of her journey, to borrow a phrase, "up from poverty" to Harvard and the White House. It's a terrific story and a very important story for the light it sheds on America in 2022.



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"There Is Nothing for You Here" at [Brookings Institution](#) available here accessed October 23, 2022.

End Notes

1. "Fiona Hill," at [Brookings](#) available here accessed October 17, 2022.
2. Borger, Julian. "There Is Nothing for You Here – Review" in [The Guardian](#) available here accessed October 24, 2022.
3. Hill, Fiona. **There Is Nothing for You Here: Finding Opportunity in the Twenty-First Century**. (Boston: Mariner House, An Imprint of Harper Collins, 2021), p. 10.
4. Cf. **Book Notes #118** "Insights on How Civil Wars Start" which can be found here.
5. Hill, cited above, p. 357.
6. Ibid., p. 358.
7. Ibid., p. 359.

8. Cf. Botstein, Leon. *Jefferson's Children: Education and the Promise of America*. (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

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