

BOOK REVIEW

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“A Letter to America,” by David L. Boren. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008. www.oupres.com. 112 pages. \$14.95

For the benefit of those readers who for the past twenty-odd months have been living under a rock, in a cave, on Mars: 2008 has been an election year. As such, this year has seen its fair share of analysts, academics and elder statesmen offering up their sage advice to the incoming president. “A Letter to America” by David Boren, a former U.S. senator and current president of the University of Oklahoma, finds its place comfortably in this cadre of quadrennial self-help books. However, despite the arm-chair-presidenting so typical of these types of works, Boren’s book does distinguish itself in some important ways.

For those looking for anything terribly original in the way of novel critiques or unique and inventive remedies, I would recommend looking elsewhere. The book reads like a fairly commonplace laundry list of problems with contemporary foreign and domestic politics in America. Likewise, the astute and earnest analyst seeking a complex and nuanced rendering of the intricate policy debates of our time hardly need bother. True to its epistolary genre, “A Letter to America” is long on rhetoric and short on argumentation. However, Boren does manage in his terse 100-page tear through American politics to evince a remarkable clarity of vision that cuts straight to the heart of the most pressing problems in American public life, which speaks well to the author’s decades of experience in national government. Moreover, the distance from this scene afforded him by his long tenure as a university president—where neither his seat nor his teaching position are remotely in question—gives him the considerable freedom to not mince words and call the problems he rightly diagnoses for what they are. Reading this book is similar to talking with that aged grandfather or great-uncle in whom time and experience have eroded all sense of protecting over-fragile feelings and generated an impatience with waffling, causing them to speak truths that are all the more painful for the quickness with which they cut to the heart of the matter.

The chapter titles are self-explanatory and I will spare the reader the details of his frequently penetrating, if somewhat oft-rehearsed, arguments. Suffice it to say that Boren is firmly secure in his status as an advocate of Liberalism, both on the national and international stages. He reaffirms his place as a strong advocate for the power of international institutions and organizations, and is in no way shy about his belief in the power and beneficence of American leadership in the world and the transformative power of democracy. In addition, his take on domestic issues shows him to be well within the American Democratic mainstream, advocating strong government investment in infrastructure, education and other areas, all in the hopes of buttressing the dwindling American middle class.

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If this were all there were to the book, there would be little upon which to recommend it. However, where Boren truly sets himself and this work apart are in his adamant insistence upon the failure of the American public and its complicity in the creation of the problems that face us today. In a time when it is in high fashion to criticize the U.S., this book stands out as an example of a work that takes “We the People” to task for our own failures, which have surly been as great and disastrous as any of the insidious, if bumbling, machinations of George W. Bush or Dick Cheney. In particular, Boren frets over alarming statistics that demonstrate what we’ve all known but been afraid to admit or recognize: we, as a people, are losing our sense of our history and the identity that evolved from our experiences as a growing nation. In truth, the key to the book can be found in two of Boren’s most astute observations: that “we as citizens are becoming incapable of protecting our rights and democratic institutions, because we do not even know our own history”; and that “one of our greatest shortcomings as Americans is our failure to be intellectually curious about what is happening to us as a people.” He relates this quite brilliantly to the decline, both domestically and on the international stage, of the spirit of cooperation and pluralism upon which this nation was ostensibly founded.

It is in the breakdown of genuinely open, honest and respectful conversations with ourselves and others that Boren sees the source of our deepening national crises. Despite his stereotypically American-politician faith in the global value of democracy, he approaches it with a circumspection worthy of a first-order statesman. Simultaneously invoking John Stuart Mill and Fareed Zakaria, Boren points out that “democracy does not automatically lead to enhanced freedom,” and suggests that the best way to encourage a freer world is to live our lives with the civic virtue and responsibility required of a well-functioning democracy. His central problematic throughout the book is the transition the American people now face as we move from simply the lead horse of the Light Brigade, to a *leader* in the world. And Boren would be quick to remind us that being out in front is not the same thing as being a leader.

All told, this book offers little of interest to the policy wonk looking for some new and brilliant niche into which he or she may insinuate themselves. But as the title suggests, the intended audience is neither the wonk nor the careful and critical analyst. Rather, it is a clarion call to the people of the United States of America to wake up to our own shortcomings and take responsibility for our place in the world. Far from offering fodder for graduate dissertations, or lengthy governmental reports, what this book offers is a much-needed picture of the American mind that throws into light the deficiencies which have run rampant and led us to be disenfranchised, distrustful and distrusted. Boren’s position high atop the ivory tower affords him an excellent vantage point from which to snipe at the gilded Laputa of America’s government whose moorings to the American people are being frayed daily by neglect and active malfeasance. And for *that* reason, this author would recommend its careful study.