

“Thine Alabaster Cities Gleam” Explains Why America is in Trouble

Review of Lawrence Velvel's book

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For an original view about why America is in trouble, read “Thine Alabaster Cities Gleam”(Doukathsan Press) by award-winning author Lawrence Velvel.

If his book title, taken from the fourth stanza of the national hymn “America The Beautiful,” is intended as sarcasm, that’s only because of the author’s outrage over the injuries he has seen inflicted on the country he loves.

Velvel grew up in Chicago —site of the Columbian Exposition of 1893 whose architectural “White City” inspired poet Katharine Lee Bates to describe the promise of “alabaster cities” in her beloved hymn.

And it is this glorious promise that Velvel shows over and over again in his 818-page quartet of books, now collected for the first time in one volume, that has been shattered by the forces of dishonesty and greed.

Velvel writes all about it from his insider’s perspective, based on 40 years in the legal field as a law student at the University of Michigan, Justice Department attorney, private practitioner, law professor and cofounder and dean of a maverick law school pioneering a heralded new approach to legal education. The book, he says, is “lightly fictionalized to protect the guilty, e.g., by changing their names.”

TACG doesn’t discuss Iraq beyond the initial invasion. It doesn’t discuss the subprime meltdown. It doesn’t discuss the widening gap between rich and poor across the nation. “Rather,” Velvel says, “I wanted instead to discuss the habits of mind, and the culture, which brought these debacles upon us.”

“My intent is to show how qualities such as honesty, competence, and compassion have continuously declined since about 1960 and how selfishness has increased dramatically,” Velvel says. “You can see in our leadership that dishonesty is rampant, fake celebrityhood is worshipped, and competence and modesty take back seats.”

“What has emerged is extensive human and societal wreckage, and the rise of a selfish class characterized by men such as President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, the late Enron CEO Ken Lay, and WorldCOM CEO Bernie Ebbers,” Velvel says, adding, “and hundreds of thousands or, maybe millions, more, who share their rotten values.”

“In fact, you can depend upon most people to do the wrong thing most of the time,” he

says. At one point, Velvel writes of his protagonist:

“It was only then that he finally knew in his gut, where it really counts, not just in his head, where it does not, that most people, most of the time, do not care a whit for social justice, care only about betterment of their own selfish interests, are impervious to reason no matter how objectively persuasive it may be, and will dissemble or sometimes even lie outright at the drop of a hat.”

Velvel’s book will resonate with anyone who has ever been treated badly in any court, federal or state, e.g., people involved in cases ranging from billion dollar litigations to family law cases like divorces and child custody fights.

Describing both the narrower and broader aspects of Velvel’s work, Amazon reviewer Daniel Jolley adds, Velvel “attempts to show what has gone terribly wrong in the American legal system in the latter half of the twentieth-century and how the problem has spread throughout American culture.”

Adds historian Howard Zinn, Velvel “delivers a scathing critique, based on personal experience, of the pretense and corruption that pervades the world of academe, of law schools, and the legal profession...Coming from a dean of a law school, this bold refusal to ‘play ball,’ to ‘play it safe’ is especially refreshing.”

In real life, Velvel is cofounder and dean of the fiercely independent Massachusetts School of Law at Andover, which is purposefully designed to educate minority, immigrant and low-income students that could not otherwise afford a quality legal education. Founded in 1988, MSL today has a student body of 600 students whose \$13,300 annual tuition is less than half that charged by other New England law schools.

A prolific writer, Velvel has authored hundreds of professional legal articles, newspaper columns and internet essays on a wide variety of topics from civil liberties to foreign policy. He is also the author of “Undeclared War and Civil Disobedience: The American System in Crisis” (Dunellen). Velvel’s involvement with books is also expressed as host of an hour-long television book review show, “Books of Our Time,” produced by MSL and seen on Comcast throughout New England and the mid-Atlantic states. Numerous prize-winning authors have described him as the best prepared interviewer they ever had.

Further information and to arrange for interviews with Dean Velvel, or to obtain copies of his book, please contact Sherwood Ross, Media Consultant to Massachusetts School of Law.

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