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NOTHING. EVERYTHING.



A Review of *Fulfillment: Winning and Losing in One-click America*, by Alec MacGillis

BOOK REVIEW BY LIEUTENANT COLONEL DANIEL E. SCHOENI

Fulfillment covers a lot of ground, but it is a book about the tertiary effects of e-commerce on both America as a whole and, in particular, the Rust Belt.

Why would a book that is manifestly about a non-legal, non-military subject be relevant for a judge advocate?

What does this have to do with the practice of law in the Air Force? Why should it be reviewed in these pages? Let me borrow a line from an underappreciated movie. When his forces reconquered the Holy Land in 1187, the character based on the Ayyubid sultan, Saladin, is asked what Jerusalem was worth, he says: “Nothing. Everything.”^[1] So it is here. This book has *nothing* (directly) and *everything* (indirectly) to do with our practice.

Fulfillment covers a lot of ground, but it is a book about the tertiary effects of e-commerce on both America as a whole and, in particular, the Rust Belt. This subject is a vital concern for at least three reasons. First, a disproportionate share of Airmen hail from the kinds of places described in this book;^[2] a better understanding of our clients makes us better lawyers. Second, it begins with the story of a town that is of historical interest to all Airmen and describes its industrial decline in the last three decades: Dayton, Ohio. Third, it raises worrisome questions about whether a post-industrial America would win a fight with near-peer adversaries. Any one of these three would make the book worth reading.

SOMETIMES HARD TO FOLLOW

Yet I also find this book maddening. Rather than the linear reasoning taught in law school, it employs a discursive, meandering narrative that is sometimes hard to follow. Its conclusions are not plainly stated, its logic frustratingly elliptical. Insofar as I can discern what MacGillis is driving at, I mostly disagree with him. But even for an unapologetic free-trader and economic libertarian like me, there is value in exploring the sociology of our times and in considering what economic success on the coasts has wrought for the forgotten places in “flyover” country. He and I probably disagree about the causes of the problems he describes, their long-term consequences, and what policies (if any) ought to be undertaken. Even so, the story he tells is worth considering.

KNOWING OUR CLIENTS

There’s a canard that after the landslide election of 1972, a writer at the *New Yorker* said, “I can’t believe Nixon won. I don’t know anyone who voted for him.”^[3] Happen to you lately? It has to me. I’m a recovering political junkie, but I have been surprised by the results of two of the last three presidential elections. Many would argue that white working-class men have driven the election results in the last several cycles, either by showing up at the polls or staying home. We may fancy ourselves astute observers of our countrymen because during our careers we live in a half dozen states across the land. I wonder, however, if a steady government paycheck insulates us from our neighbors and if we never live long enough in one place to notice the local pathologies.^[4] *Fulfillment* provides a crash course in what is going on with the white working class.

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white working class.

Since white working-class men are a shrinking share of the population, why do we care? This is just one demographic group, albeit a large one. Fair question. This book does

not provide a monocausal explanation for all that ails the body politic, much less prescribe a single remedy. But disgruntled members of this group have been in the news lately. It behooves us to understand them better so that we can provide our clients legal counsel enriched with the perspective of moral, economic, social, and political considerations.^[5] This would include not only advising on the root causes of political extremism but also could make litigators more sensitive to socioeconomic factors that could serve as useful evidence in mitigation or perhaps inform advice we give during legal assistance. This is not the only book of its kind, but it serves as an introduction to a group that our twenty-first century economy has left behind.

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But is that true?

SILICON VALLEY TO THE RUST BELT

All Airmen should know the story of Orville and Wilbur Wright. There is no better introduction than David McCullough’s *The Wright Brothers*.^[6] But while McCullough shows that there was something special about the bookish home in which the brothers were raised and how that contributed to their innovations,^[7] MacGillis describes the broader cultural milieu that made the twentieth century Midwest the Silicon Valley of its time. Though a small city, Dayton was the paradigmatic example of that innovation culture,^[8] with not only the advancements in aviation to its credit but also two other major firms that designed and produced world-beating technologies. In recent decades, Dayton has lost its manufacturing jobs; its shiny corporate headquarters have departed. What does this portend for our lead in innovation? Will San Jose go the way of Dayton? These questions lie beyond the scope of the book, but for Airmen keenly aware that our technological advantage is narrowing,^[9] such worries linger. Whither innovation?^[10]

A DEINDUSTRIALIZED ARSENAL

Many historians would argue that the allies won World War II not so much because of the genius of their generals but because of the combined industrial output of the Anglo-American “arsenal of democracy.”^[11] This view is not uncontested, but industrial output certainly mattered. In like manner, MacGillis quotes a former worker at Baltimore’s Sparrows Point steel mill, who warns that but for the mill, we would all be speaking Japanese or German. This echoes a common concern that America has fully deindustrialized, that we no longer *make* anything. But is that true?

Despite the popular lament, U.S. manufacturing is actually stronger than it has ever been. At the same time, it is also a fact that manufacturing jobs have been cut in recent decades. But jobs are not the same as output. One study indicated that in the half century from 1950 to 2010, U.S. manufactures increased by 600 percent.^[12] Though manufacturing *jobs* are fewer, our *output* is second only to China.

Don’t count us out only because
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Another problem with the book is that it sometimes feels like MacGillis is cherry-picking, making his account tendentious. For every city whose travails he describes in heartbreaking detail, there is another that has adapted. Dayton, Baltimore, and El Paso may struggle,^[13] but other non-coastal heartland cities such as Columbus, Kansas City, Des Moines, Madison, and Minneapolis are doing just fine, thank you.^[14] Further, not every lost job is outsourced;^[15] if jobs are not so much disappearing but rather moving to more business-friendly cities or regions, that is perhaps less worrisome than MacGillis’s ominous account would suggest.

As for the defense industrial base, this is my rejoinder. Like America generally, the Rust Belt is not so deindustrialized or hapless as MacGillis supposes.^[16] Threats abroad are multiplying. But those who would do us harm would do well

to remember that the U.S. armed forces, as well as its supporting industrial base, have time and again proven themselves to be formidable adversaries.^[17] Don’t count us out only because *some* American cities are no longer flourishing.

CONCLUSION

As other reviews have noted, if you are seeking an understanding of the internal workings of Amazon, you will not find it here.^[18] This book is instead about the flotsam and jetsam that have been set adrift as educated workers emigrate and financial, business, and political power consolidate in elite coastal cities such as Seattle, San Francisco, New York, and D.C. Despite its nostalgia for an economy and social arrangements of a bygone age and its inconclusiveness, which at times seems like advocacy for a weak form of socialism or perhaps a robust industrial policy, the book raises important questions. There is value in considering the collateral damage of the last four decades’ astonishing economic growth,^[19] even if we are still grateful for that progress and ultimately unconvinced that affluence must be zero sum. That makes this book a worthwhile read. MacGillis’s broader thesis, that by delivering *everything* to our doorsteps, e-commerce may leave us with *nothing*—bereft of remunerative work, domestic manufacturing, even hope for the future—is, however, unpersuasive.

Edited by Captain Charlton S. Hedden

Layout by Thomasa Huffstutler

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lieutenant Colonel Daniel E. Schoeni, USAF

(B.A., Brigham Young University; M.A., University of Iowa; J.D., University of Iowa; LL.M., George Washington University; Ph.D. University of Nottingham, ABD) is currently assigned as the Chief of Acquisition Law at Headquarters Air Force Materiel Command, Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio. He is licensed in Iowa and the District of Columbia.

ENDNOTES

- [1] KINGDOM OF HEAVEN (Twentieth Century Fox 2005).
- [2] See *Population Representation in the Military Services: Fiscal Year 2015 Summary Report*, 22–23 CNA (2015), <https://www.cna.org/pop-rep/2015/summary/summary.pdf>; Ann Scott Tyson, *Youths in Rural U.S. are Drawn to Military*, WASH. POST., Nov. 4, 2005, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2005/11/04/youths-in-rural-us-are-drawn-to-military/24122550-6bb7-4174-93a0-7e1d91a78b2d/>; Dave Philipps & Tim Arango, *Who Signs Up to Fight? Makeup of U.S. Recruits Showing Glaring Disparity*, N.Y. TIMES, Jan. 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/10/us/military-enlistment.html>.
- [3] See, e.g., John Podhoretz, *The Actual Pauline Kael Quote—Not as Bad, and Worse*, COMMENTARY, Feb. 27, 2011, <https://www.commentary.org/john-podhoretz/the-actual-pauline-kael-quote%E2%80%94not-as-bad-and-worse/>.
- [4] You may want to consider whether you have more in common with the residents of Fishtown or Belmont using the following quiz; I suspect that the vast majority of the JAG Corps has much more in common with Belmont. *Do You Live in a Bubble? A Quiz*, PBS NEWS HOUR, Mar. 24, 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/economy/do-you-live-in-a-bubble-a-quiz-2>. Cf. CHARLES MURRAY, *COMING APART: THE STATE OF WHITE AMERICA, 1960–2010* (2012).
- [5] Air Force Rules of Professional Conduct (2018), Rule 2.1.
- [6] For a valuable review of McCullough’s book and explanation of its relevance to procuring next-generation defense technology, see Stephen L. Schooner & Nathan E. Castellano, *Reinvigorating Innovation: Lessons Learned from the Wright Brothers*, 56 CONT. MGMT. 46 (April 2016).
- [7] DAVID MCCULLOUGH, *THE WRIGHT BROTHERS* 17, 30, 73 (2015) (describing a vast family library and the encouragement of learning); *id.* at 28–30, 34, 36–39, 51–52, 67–68, 91–92 (arguing that Orville and Wilbur unlocked the mystery of heavier than air flight not only because of mechanical skills acquired from tinkering with bicycles but through their studies of the works on aeronautics and observations of birds in flight). In many ways, they were not outliers but representative of the broader culture of the Midwest, whose contributions to humanity have been considerable, and the account of which has been mostly neglected by professional historians. See generally JON K. LAUCK, *THE LOST REGION: TOWARD A REVIVAL OF MIDWESTERN HISTORY* (2013).
- [8] See MARK BERNSTEIN, *GRAND ECCENTRICS: TURNING THE CENTURY: DAYTON AND THE INVENTING OF AMERICA* (1996) (describing four prominent Dayton inventors who were contemporaries with the Orville and Wilbur Wright: Charles Kettering, John H. Patterson, Arthur Morgan, and James Cox).
- [9] See Gen Charles Q. Brown, Jr., *Accelerate Change or Lose* (Aug. 2020) at 3–4, https://www.af.mil/Portals/1/documents/csaf/CSAF_22/CSAF_22_Strategic_Approach_Accelerate_Change_or_Lose_31_Aug_2020.pdf (describing the erosion of America’s competitive advantage, noting China’s aggressive efforts to narrow that gap, and observing that “[a]ir dominance is not a birthright”).
- [10] For an introduction to this debate, see Daniel Schoeni, *Three Competing Options for Acquiring Innovation*, 32 AIR & SPACE POWER J. 4 (Winter 2018) (summarizing three articles written in response to the AFJAGS’s first national security law writing competition by Brig Gen Linell Letendre, Maj Nicholas Frommelt, and Capt Matthew Ormsbee and arguing that wider competition open systems architecture is the better course).
- [11] FDR made the phrase “arsenal of democracy” famous in his eponymous speech delivered on December 29, 1940, but industrialist-turned-mobilizer Bill Knudson who coined the term. See ARTHUR HERMAN, *FREEDOM’S FORGE: HOW AMERICAN BUSINESS PRODUCED VICTORY DURING WWII* 69–71, 115, 129 (2012).
- [12] William A. Strauss, *Is U.S. Manufacturing Disappearing?*, MIDWEST ECON. BLOG, FED. RES. BANK CHI., Aug. 19, 2010, <https://www.chicagofed.org/publications/blogs/midwest-economy/2010/isusmanufacturing>. Most Americans polled in a recent survey were aware that U.S. output had increased, with nearly half (47%) believing it had declined. Drew Desilver, *Most Americans Unaware that as U.S. Manufacturing Jobs Have Disappeared, Output Has Grown*, PEW RES. CENTER, July 25, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/07/25/most-americans-unaware-that-as-u-s-manufacturing-jobs-have-disappeared-output-has-grown/>.
- [13] To that list could be added several other stagnant Rust Belt cities: Flint, Youngstown, Rockford, Muncie, and Erie. See Aaron M. Renn, *The Rust Belt’s Mixed Population Story*, CITY J., Jul. 1, 2019, <https://www.city-journal.org/rust-belt-population-growth>.
- [14] *Id.* Moreover, smaller cities are also succeeding: Iowa City, Iowa; Lafayette, Indiana; and Traverse City, Michigan. Aaron M. Renn, *The Sunny Side of Midsized*, CITY J., Sept. 18, 2018, <https://twitter.com/cityjournal/status/1048405989563793408>, reviewing MICK CORNETT & JAYSON WHITE, *THE NEXT AMERICAN CITY* (2018) (arguing that mid-sized cities such as Oklahoma City, Des Moines, and Charleston are creating competitive alternatives to the elite coastal megacities). See also Adam Roberts, *The Midwest: A Region with an Outsized Punch*, ECONOMIST, Jul. 23, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/07/23/a-region-with-outsized-punch> (observing that smaller cities like Ann Arbor, Madison, and Pittsburgh have done well of late). Even before the current pandemic accelerated the flight from large cities, a Rust Belt “revival” was already underway. See *Schumpeter, A Rust-belt Revival*, ECONOMIST, Mar. 5, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/business/2016/03/03/a-rust-belt-revival>. This was not merely a shift toward lower paying jobs in the services sector, but even saw the return of manufacturing in once dying cities. See Aaron M. Renn, *Manufacturing a Comeback*, CITY J., Spring 2018, <https://www.city-journal.org/html/manufacturing-comeback-15833.html> (describing the rebound in Grand Rapids only seven years after *Newsweek* declared it one of America’s dying cities). With the ability to telework from virtually anywhere has come further interest in low-cost cities between the coasts. See Matt S. Clancy, *Remote Work’s Time Has Come*, CITY J., Spring 2020, <https://www.city-journal.org/remoteworks-time-has-come>.

- [15] Over the last half century, there has been a well-documented migration of industry from the Midwest to the South. See, e.g., Gavin Wright, *The Economic Revolution in the American South*, 1:1 ECON. PERSP. 161 (1987).
- [16] *America's Mittelstand*, ECONOMIST, Jul. 23, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2020/07/23/americas-mittelstand> (reporting, “Midwesterners still like to make stuff.”).
- [17] As one commentator recently observed, “China is testing the patterns of history by taking on the United States” as “America is the most lethal competitor of the modern era,” having “defeated a series of illiberal powers—Germany (twice), Japan, and the Soviet Union”. “For over a century, the surest path to destruction has been inviting the focused hostility of the United States.” Hal Brands, *China's Creative Challenge—and the Threat to America*, COMMENTARY, May 2021, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/hal-brands/chinas-geopolitical-challenge-threat-to-america/>.
- [18] See, e.g., Jennifer Szalai, In ‘Fulfillment’, One-Click Shopping Is Cheap, Easy and Economically Unsustainable, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/10/books/review-fulfillment-alec-macgillis.html>.
- [19] *Alternative States*, ECONOMIST, Mar. 31, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2018/03/31/the-average-american-is-much-better-off-now-than-four-decades-ago> (citing data indicating the average American is much better off than four decades ago, with a 51% rise in median household income between 1979 and 2014).