



Midwest Book Review

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An American Commentary: Social Problems That Changed America In The 21st Century

Silvio Laccetti

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Patrick A. Berzinski, Reviewer

www.tranquility49.com

Professor Silvio Laccetti began his distinguished college-teaching career in the mid-1960s, when he was just a few years older than his senior students.

A professor of History and Social Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology, Laccetti spent four decades instructing future engineers and captains of American industry, outlining the historical linkages between their fields of study and the larger issues confronting an increasingly globalized culture.

Later in his university career, and especially following the events of September 11, 2001, Laccetti began to publish an impressive stream of compelling columns for national newspapers, syndicated by several major US distribution services.

The author has now assembled sixty of these columns, published 2001-2013, in one volume, under the title "An American Commentary: Social Problems that Changed America in the 21st Century."

Covering a wide range of contemporary topics, these essays are organized into six broad categories: Education, American Culture, Globalism, Economics, Politics and 9/11.

The author showcases these columns with spot-on follow-up new commentaries that illuminate his prescient views on issues such as the progressive domination of our lives by technological connectivity. This hindsight/foresight approach is a unique addition to the commentary genre. New commentary offers the reader continuity and updating of topics.

Laccetti opines with the ironic authority of one who has watched and analyzed encroaching phenomena over the decades. Essays such as "The Lost Art of Writing" and "American History is Disappearing" are powerful - yet curiously humorous - testaments to the degradation of coherent communication, wisdom and memory in an era of instantaneous mass connection.

Indeed, amid the blunt topicality, the professional historian often stands ready to assert his perspective. In the essay "Can Pope Benedict Re-Invent Europe?" Laccetti muses about the historical origins of European Civilization in the Medieval period. "Europe was born of an alliance between kings and priests," he asserts. It was the strategic pact between the Frankish monarchy of Pippin and the Roman Papacy that cemented the foundations of modern Europe. "All of Western history thereafter was shaped by this event," he concludes.

And yet, the author is quite capable of drawing poignant lessons from his everyday personal encounters. In the essay, "The Homeless Are Not Helpless," the reader learns of the plight of a particular homeless person whom the author attempts to pull back into the mainstream. The "new commentary" update continues the narrative about the individual in question, revealing successes and failures.

The section on education is notable for the author's characterization of the

"Education Industrial Complex." Whether the essays deal with public schools, college literacy, college athletics, grade inflation or cheating, Laccetti paints an often disturbing picture of the American education scene. The author acquits himself as one in a distinguished line of critics decrying lowered standards and diluted curricula.

Laccetti situates his earliest columns, written in the aftermath of 9/11, at the end of the book. His seminal column, titled "Everyone a Soldier," which received wide syndication, recalls the emergence of a public spirit of unity and civic duty in the aftermath of the terrorist acts orchestrated by Osama bin Laden. Writing in 2014, the author observes wistfully that "it may seem quaint to read my exhortations to a motivated audience, for that post-crisis unity is gone."

"Silvio is a master craftsman of the commentary," writes Josh Gohlke, former editorial page editor of The Philadelphia *Inquirer* in an opening testimonial. "His essays approach events and trends with wisdom, knowledge, enthusiasm, curiosity, creativity and humor. Watching adolescents play video games might lead him to reflect on the nature of war and peace, while a busload of busted public officials might have him examining the relationship between corruption and civilization."

Indeed, readers will agree with Mr. Gohlke, and ten other opinion-editor testimonials included in the book, that "An American Commentary" is a signifying contribution to opinion journalism, offering an urbane witness to manifold cultural shifts at the dawn of a new century.

The book is recommended for concerned citizens, young intellectuals with a passion for recent history and university and public libraries.

Patrick A. Berzinski is the founder and CEO of Tranquility49 LLC, a media-communications firm in New York City.