BOOKS IN BRIEF

The Future of the United Nations: Understanding the Past to Chart a Way Forward, by Joshua Muravchik. AEI Press, 166 pages, $20

Joshua Muravchik has compiled a calm, well-documented, depressing survey of the United Nations' performance, concentrating on the last 15 years, which indicts the organization as hopelessly corrupt and ineffective. He sheds light on several scandals that have been swept under the rug, e.g., Secretary General Kofi Annan's cover-up of sexual harassment charges against High Commissioner for Refugees Ruud Lubbers. Other more terrible scandals, such as the pervasive rape of children by U.N. peacekeepers in central Africa, are not even mentioned. If anything, Muravchik, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, is far too generous in his discussion of the U.N.'s specialized agencies, some of which (like the World Health Organization and UNESCO) have been mired in their own corruption scandals. But his brief inventory of abuses supports his call for dismantling or at least downgrading the "political machinery" that confers distinctive prestige on all other U.N. operations. A useful set of charts at the end of the book clarifies recent trends. For instance, American isolation in the General Assembly in recent years (where the body voted with preferred U.S. positions less than a third of the time) is simply a return to the pattern in place before the mid-1990s. Another chart shows that the world's most repressive nations were less likely to be condemned by the Human Rights Commission than invited to join it. Muravchik offers no grounds for hoping that recent gestures toward "reform" will make any meaningful difference to the U.N.'s actual performance.

—Jeremy Rabkin
Cornell University

How Progressives Rewrote the Constitution, by Richard A. Epstein. Cato Institute, 156 pages, $15.95

In the introduction to this elegantly reasoned book, University of Chicago Law School professor Richard Epstein prints a small chart showing a steady decline in child labor in the United States between 1900 and 1930. While discussing an array of cases (and occasionally summarizing them a bit too quickly for non-lawyers) Epstein refers back to the chart at regular intervals. It is the book's touchstone. Along the way, he notes other findings for the same era such as reductions in the average number of hours worked, lengthening average lifespans, and increasing wages to make a simple point: Progressives did not have to rewrite the Constitution to solve the social problems of their day. The early 20th-century Supreme Court, with its limited conception of police power and broad conception of liberty, was neither narrow-minded nor simplistic. Economic and technological change did not render its constitutionalism obsolete; Progressive jurists and lawyers simply assumed that it did. "The older conceptual scheme did not collapse of its own weight. All that really happened was that several justices lost faith in it, without being able to show where it broke down." The result was unfortunate. Under pressure from the New Deal, the Court allowed more restrictions on economic and personal liberty. Since then, they have changed course, allowing ever more scope for personal liberty, while holding the line on economic liberty. Constitutionally speaking, the result is mush. As a whole, the book provides a sound introduction to the case against legal Progressivism and for the Constitution. Like other books on the Progressives it raises an interesting question: why were they able to fool so many people for such a long time?

—Richard Samuelson
The Henry Salvatori Center

A People's History of the Civil War: Struggles for the Meaning of Freedom, by David Williams. The New Press, 594 pages, $30

Socialist Howard Zinn titled his oracular account of America, *A People's History of the United States*. Now, more than a quarter century after its publication, his tirade against "guns and greed" has given rise to a book series. Written by various Zinn devotees, the "people's history" books include accounts of the American Revolution, the Vietnam War, and now the Civil War.

It is no surprise that David Williams's mostly Marxist tale presents "common folk" or "working folk" as its heroes and "wealthy elites" as their nemesis. According to Williams, who teaches history at Valdosta State University, American capitalists divided the downtrodden against each other throughout the Civil War era, thereby controlling the dispossessed, including poor whites, women, blacks, and Indians. Bound by this ideological straitjacket, he wobbles between repetitive generalizations about the poor and jeremiads against the rich.

While offering only fleeting glimpses into the lives of ordinary citizens and soldiers, the book's framework also fails to account for the trajectories of great Americans like Abraham Lincoln. If dollars are destiny, how did a Kentucky backwoodsman become the Great Emancipator? In fact, Williams spares no invective in his mistreatment of Lincoln. "Though differing with Confederates on the issue of disunion," he writes, "Lincoln was united with them in his racist views." For Williams, Lincoln is just another "elitist."

—David J. Bobb
Hillsdale College

A Higher Form of Cannibalism? Adventures in the Art and Politics of Biography, by Carl Rollyson. Ivan R. Dee, 198 pages, $24.95

The title comes from Rudyard Kipling's colorful characterization of biographies. *A Higher Form of Cannibalism* is a lively, anecdotal, loosely organized survey of the challenges faced by biographers in their attempt to collect, shape, and publish what they have come to regard as the truth about their subjects. Carl Rollyson, an English professor at Baruch College and a successful American biographer whose subjects include Rebecca West and Lillian Hellman, not only accedes to the charge that biography has become a "bloodsport" but claims that it has always been, and must be, so. Whether or not the biography is "authorized" by the subject (or the family or estate), his interests and those of the biographer are fundamentally in conflict. While the former wants a positive portrait or no biography at all, the latter seeks to produce a book that conforms to what he has discovered from more sources than the subject is aware of—or would wish to divulge.

Rollyson demolishes many of the pieties surrounding what is, after all, a popular and commercially successful genre whose most severe critics tend to be journalists, academics, and writers intent on separating their written works from their private lives. The "adventures" that illustrate his points include disputes between Boswell and Johnson, between J.A. Froude and Thomas Carlyle's admirers, between Richard Aldington and those interested in preserving the legendary T. E. Lawrence, and between Ian Hamilton and J.D. Salinger. Rollyson also