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Limits to Power: Some Friendly Reminders (Book Review)

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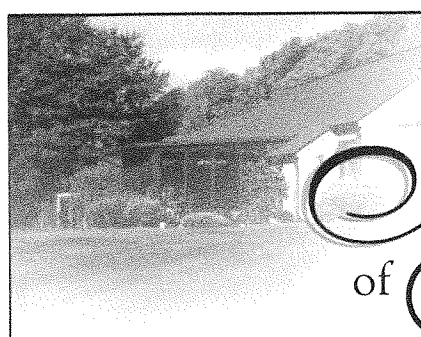
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stantial detail. For those who are well-versed in the academic literature, this may be of great value, but for the ordinary reader, it is frequently confusing. Fortunately, the sections contrasting his arguments with those of three other authors' comparisons are carefully set off in the text and each of the interspersed sections is introduced with a summary statement in a bold font. Ashworth advises those who only want to follow his main argument to skip these sections—advice well taken.

I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in Paul, but more than that, to anyone who wants to see how we Friends can claim to be primitive Christianity revived.

—Paul Buckley

Paul Buckley, a Quaker historian and theologian, attends North Meadow Circle of Friends in Indianapolis, Ind.

Limits to Power: Some Friendly Reminders

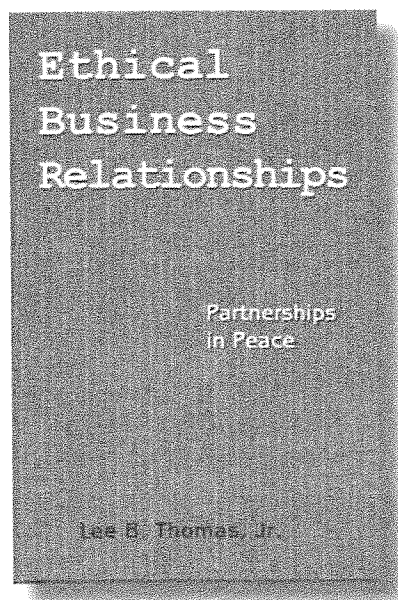
By Newton Garver. Second edition. Center Working Papers, 2007. 156 pages. \$15/paperback.

In this second edition of *Limits to Power: Some Friendly Reminders*, Newton Garver describes himself as a liberal Quaker philosopher “and left-handed to boot.” Alas, his book is entrusted for review to an unapologetically right-handed evangelical Quaker, and a lawyer to boot.

But this ironic turn of events is not sinister, nor even alarming. It may be another example of God's dexterity in using different points of view to illuminate unexpected truths.

Limits to Power is not a grandiose book. Its 156 pages could be read quickly, especially since Garver's prose is a pleasure. But the book does not reward the hasty reader. Most of its 19 essays were originally published separately on the Buffalo Report website: nine discourses on American politics and ten on Bolivia. The opening invocation (“God Bless America”) and concluding poetic Epilogue were composed decades apart. Each part is like the ministry of a Friend repeatedly burdened to speak a few words in meeting, leaving to the Spirit the task of making something out of the pieces.

To the reader who can spare the time to read reflectively, the main structural weakness in the book—that the various parts come from different trains of thought rather than forming a coherent whole—turns into a virtue. Garver juxtaposes ideas that we might not otherwise encounter together, connections that suggest possible new insights into how humans were meant to relate to each other,



Lee B. Thomas, Jr. is a longtime-businessman and founding member of Louisville Friends Meeting, which celebrated its 50th year in 2004.

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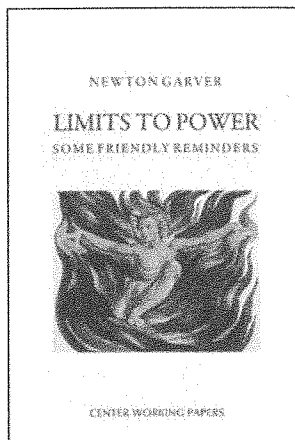
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er, and how we might help public conflicts become opportunities for our communities to move closer to Truth.

For example, Garver prompts us to consider how freedom relates to accountability. He critiques the tendency to think of liberty as being the freedom to make choices without consequences, to draw boundaries that protect our own options because they are "our business" and permit us to disregard many of our effects on others because they are someone else's problem. Garver argues that this ideal of "frictionless" lives would lead instead to pointless lives that don't accomplish anything. We need accountability to give us the incentive and the leverage to push against the status quo and make changes.

Garver builds on this insight to criticize trends in modern political life, such as the pervasiveness of "spin" and the practice of a politics of humiliation. In an example of the admirably careful thinking abounding in the book, he defines "spin" as not quite lying, since the spinner doesn't fabricate. But the spinner tries to distract our attention from unpleasant facts and get us to give too much weight to part of the truth. Similarly, the politics of humiliation encourages us to discount some people and their needs through dehumanization, often in subtle ways. To Garver, these are not just foibles in the political system to be laughed off as "how the game is played." They poison our public discourse because they actively interfere with our ability to find truth.

These are examples of the ideas in *Limits to Power* that lead to insights I had not encountered before. Even so, there are limits to *Limits to Power*. Garver saddles himself with a conception of politics as "grounded in an arbitrary distinction between friends and foes." This makes politics mostly about power or control, something that cannot exist without an enemy. Garver almost equates politics with violence, describing it as a continuation of war by other means, since it involves striving to "call the shots" and impose one's will on others. When Garver encounters in Bolivia examples of people refusing to call the shots, he calls it

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"anti-politics."

Unfortunately, Garver himself succumbs a little to this kind of alienated politics. It shows up in a few places where Garver caricatures political and religious conservatives. It leaves him without the tools to discern whether Bolivians who put up roadblocks are practicing violence or nonviolence. Most importantly, it hamstringing his imagination when he tries to suggest ways Friends can be more redemptive in their participation in public issues.

In one of the new essays in the second edition, Garver casts George Bush as a "Decider" (eschewing compromise in pursuit of convictions) who compares unfavorably with "Negotiators," like James Baker, who readily set aside their principles in order to make acceptable deals with anyone, including tyrants. Whereas most people would think of Baker's pragmatic model as quintessential politics, or even realpolitik, Garver's concept of politics turns Bush into the "Politician" with a black-and-white (and thus alienating) worldview. All this left my head spinning.

A more powerful model of politics is available. For example, another Quaker philosopher, Phil Smith, in his *Virtue of Civility and the Practice of Politics*, describes politics as the inevitable interaction that occurs whenever any human group has to make decisions. War is still politics under Smith's approach, but so is a meeting for clearness, or a negotiation, or a stand on principle. This frees us to ask what kinds of politics are consistent with Quaker testimonies.

Limits to Power makes an important contribution. Add to it a richer understanding of politics, and it will in turn add to our understanding of our calling: to practice politics with civility in which we treasure our opponents both as fellow human beings and as a crucial God-given resource in the search for Truth.

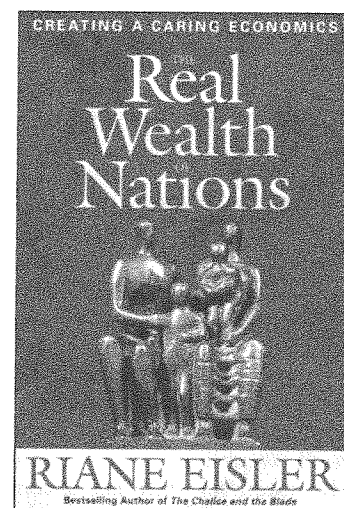
—Ron Mock

Ron Mock is associate professor of Political Science and Peace Studies at George Fox University in Newberg, Ore.

The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics

By Riane Eisler. Barrett-Koehler Publishers, 2007. 318 pages. \$24.95/hardcover.

Economics is not generally thought of as one of the caring professions. It is not like medicine, social work, psychology, counseling, or even teaching—professions that very clearly exist to improve the human condition. Economics is regarded as a hard, cold science,



and the economy is more often than not regarded as a brutal, fearsome realm. Riane Eisler wants to change all that, and she has written a book that invites a new understanding of economics.

The author's name is likely to be familiar to many readers. Twenty years ago she published *The Chalice and The Blade: Our History, Our Future*, a book that has become a classic in the literature of gender, power, and society. If a fading red paperback copy of it is not on your bookshelf or that of someone you know, I'd be surprised. In that important treatise, Eisler first articulated what she calls Cultural Transformation Theory, and its two models for understanding the structure of society and culture. The "partnership" model is one that links people in cooperative, caring ways, while the "dominator" model subordinates and devalues some, especially women and the feminine.

In *The Real Wealth of Nations*, chalice and blade meet supply and demand as Eisler attempts to apply her earlier insights to the not-so-modest task of changing how we think about economics and how we structure the economy. This task preoccupies many of us today. We see the planet threatened. We see millions impoverished. We see the devastation of war. We see a healthcare crisis. We long to do good work, to care for ourselves, for each other and for the planet, and yet we often feel caught in a system that makes these good things so hard to achieve.

Eisler reaches deep into history, culture, and the human psyche to diagnose our economic dilemma and its intransigence. For her, what ails us can be understood only if we examine the beliefs, habits, and social structures that come out of the dominator-oriented cultures. The male-superior and female-inferior views inherited from domination have had disastrous effects on humanity. Some are obvious, but much of what she has to say about the damage of domination is not so obvious. It is buried in our unconscious minds, and understanding economics in