

The meritocracy is dead. Long live the meritocracy

BY THOMAS VINCENT
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In any nonfiction book, there are two things I look for right off the bat. One: Does the author have anything interesting or provocative to say? And two: Is he any good at saying it? In "Twilight of the Elites" the answer to both questions is a resounding "yes."

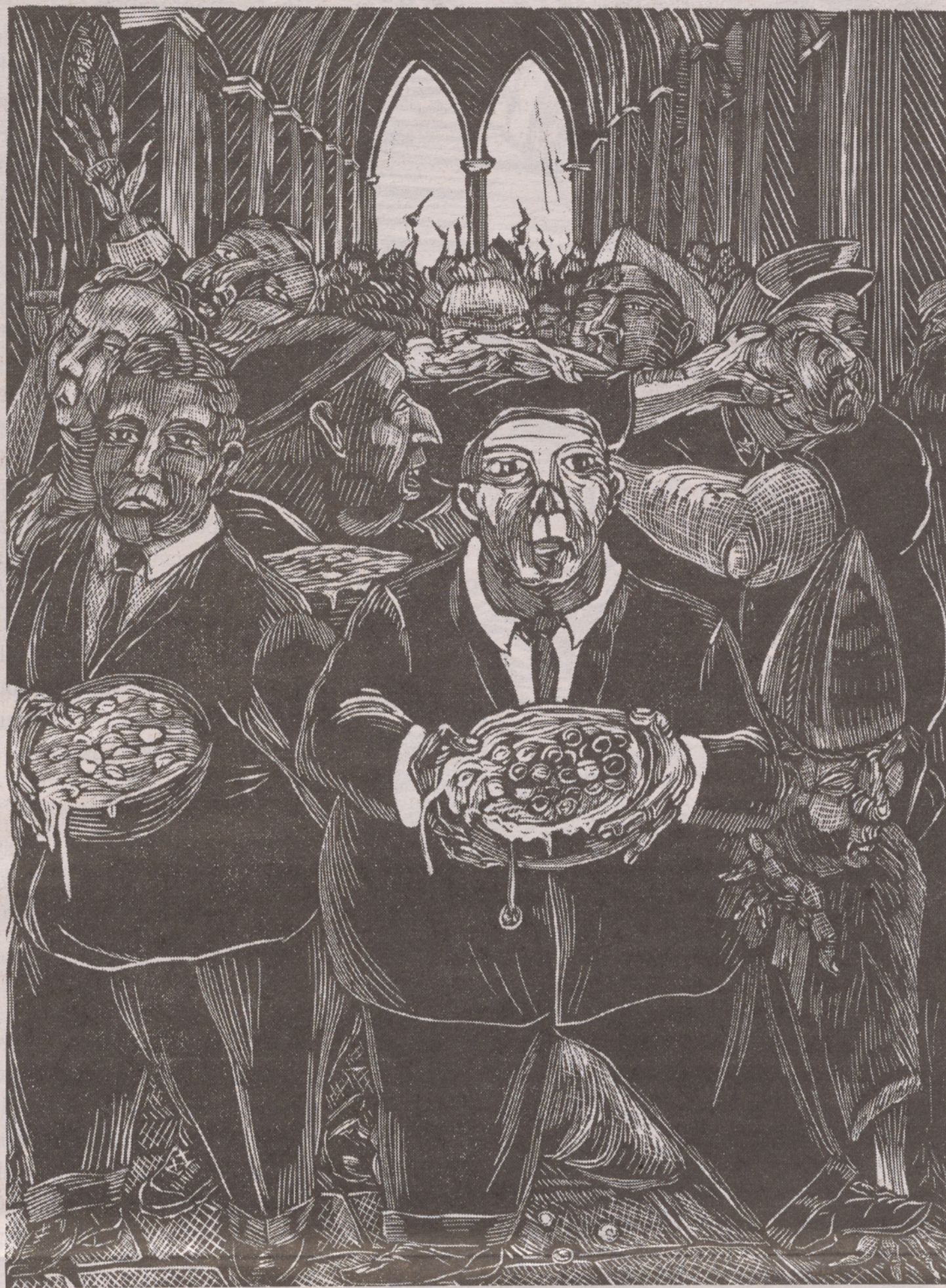
Author Christopher Hayes' inaugural effort is so packed with cogent insights and fresh observations that it bursts at the seams: "The key both to Barack Obama's political success and to his political setbacks lies in his abilities to connect to our core sense of betrayal and his inability to deliver us from it."

Twilight of the Elites: America After Meritocracy
by Christopher Hayes

In addition, TV watchers may recognize him from his stint as the host of "Up w/ Chris Hayes," on MSNBC.

In "Twilight," Hayes focuses on the current state of the nation, particularly our recent past. It is not a pretty picture: "But the core experience of the last decade isn't just political dysfunction. It's something deeper and more existentially disruptive: the near total failure of each pillar institution of our society. The financial crisis and the grinding, prolonged economic immiseration [sic] it has precipitated are just the most recent instances of elite failure, the latest in an uninterrupted cascade of corruption and incompetence."

Hayes' catalogue of woes is as complete as it is disquieting: Enron, the Iraq War, the housing bubble and the ensuing financial meltdown, even the pedophile scandals in the Catholic Church. The author lays the blame for all of these debacles squarely at the feet of those in power – the elites. And while Hayes' definition of that term is much different from that used by conservative



"Meritocracy" by Art Hazelwood

pundits, the author holds much the same view of the end results of the elites' failure: a pronounced loss of confidence in the very institutions that Americans once depended on for support and guidance.

The most controversial point in the book is Hayes' assertion that the current crop of elites in power, the ones who have screwed things up so mightily, owe their position largely to America's almost pathological

belief in a meritocracy – the abstract notion that advancement should be conditional on ability and accomplishment. "The meritocratic elite is more diverse than its predecessor, as racial minorities and women have been allowed into its institutions. And it places a greater value on high levels of educational attainment, advanced degrees, and professional schools. Where the establishment emphasized humility,

prudence and lineage, the meritocracy celebrates ambition, achievement, brains and self-betterment. Barack Obama, a multiracial child of a single mother, graduate of an elite prep school, Columbia University and Harvard Law is the ultimate product and symbol of this system. He is its crowning glory."

The notion that we actually live in a meritocracy might be a bit of a stretch for some – just consider, for example, the election of George W. Bush and his disastrous appointment of Michael Brown as head of FEMA.

Hayes agrees that while the country remains in thrall to the idea of meritorious advancement, more often than not it is more of an ideal and that in reality: "[O]ur meritocracy has failed not because it's too meritocratic, but because in practice, it isn't very meritocratic at all."

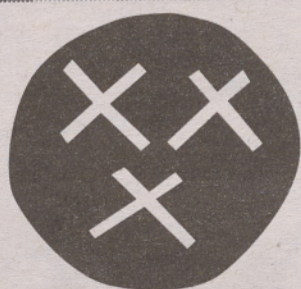
As an author, Hayes displays a bright and lively mind. Conservatives and progressives alike will find much fodder in this book for debate and discussion. The discussion of meritocracy versus aristocracy is particularly interesting. Ironically, however, though "Twilight" contains much wisdom, in the end, the book suffers from much the same problem as the author's initial observation of the president. Like Obama, Hayes is nothing short of brilliant at illuminating the reasons for our country's current malaise – our "core sense of betrayal." Sadly, however, the author's sense of what to do about it is not as clear. "The challenge, and it is not a small one, is directing the frustration, anger, and alienation we all feel into building a trans-ideological coalition that can actually dislodge the power of the post-meritocratic elite. One that marshals insurrectionist sentiment without succumbing to nihilism and manic, paranoid distrust. One that avoids the dark seduction of everything-is-broken-ism. One that leverages the deep skepticism of elites into a proactive, constructive vision of a moral, equitable and connected social order."

In other words, when it comes to delivering us from darkness, I'm afraid Hayes is as much in the dark as the rest of us.

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