

Reviews

"The Pearl Harbor Myth: Rethinking the Unthinkable," by George Victor. Potomac Books, 2007, 355 pages.

The Pearl Harbor Problem

Jane S. Shaw

For nearly 70 years, a war of words has been fought over the question of whether President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his top associates, especially Army Chief of Staff George Marshall, withheld information about the attack on Pearl Harbor from the commanders on Hawaii. The accusations started almost immediately after the attack on December 7, 1941. They led to official inquiries, charges of lying by witnesses in those inquiries, the suppression of official reports, and a multitude of books, including John Toland's "Infamy" (1981), Robert Stinnett's "Day of Deceit" (2000), and now George Victor's "The Pearl Harbor Myth," in addition to the more standard versions of the story by Gordon Prange — "At Dawn We Slept" (1981) — and Roberta Wohlstetter, "Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision" (1962).

Although I have no special expertise, my effort to understand what happened has become something of a

personal hobbyhorse, one that began when I read John Toland's "Infamy."

So let me start with "Infamy," which I came across perhaps 15 years ago. I was struck by it for several reasons. This was Toland's third book about Japan and World War II, and, as he revealed, over the years he had changed his mind. Initially, he believed that the Japanese alone had been responsible for the surprise attack; later, he concluded that warnings had been ignored; finally, he decided that high officials in Washington, including the president, knew about the attack and withheld the information so that it would be a surprise and turn American public opinion toward entering the war.

What also struck me was that Toland didn't get the kind of favorable attention his analysis deserved. He had received a Pulitzer Prize for his 1971 book "The Rising Sun," and I usually saw at least one of his books about the European war on bookstore history shelves, but "Infamy" seemed to be ignored. (Wikipedia says that "Infamy" was

"widely criticized.") Whether Toland's change of opinion, or the response to it, had anything to do with his having a Japanese wife, I don't know.

Over the years, more information came out about the circumstances surrounding Pearl Harbor, but I noticed that some prominent people still dismissed out of hand the idea that Roosevelt could have deliberately failed to warn the commanders. (Hans Trefousse's "Pearl Harbor: The Continuing Controversy" [1982] considers the idea and then rejects it.) One such skeptic was the editorial page director of *The Wall Street Journal*, Robert Bartley. To him, the possibility that the president would conceal such information was "wildly implausible; what commander would sacrifice most of a fleet to open a two-front war?" (*Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 3, 2001).

Now we have a relatively new book that delves into the question of "who knew what when," while setting it against the broader context of Roosevelt's strategy, the international

scene, including the attack on the Philippines and our allies' experiences, and the ways in which government officials generally act under pressure.

"The Pearl Harbor Myth: Rethinking the Unthinkable" is not actually the latest "revisionist" book on the subject. In June 2010, the Mises Institute published Percy Greaves' "Pearl Harbor: The Seeds and Fruits of Infamy." Greaves was chief of the minority staff during the congressional hearings on Pearl Harbor in 1945–46. Never satisfied with the outcome of those hearings (the majority report put the blame exclusively on the commanders in Hawaii), Greaves criticized the investigation and later in his life worked his findings (and additional research) into a book. He died in 1984, and his widow, Bettina Bien Greaves, a contributing editor of *Liberty*, has edited his work into the volume that was just released. It will undoubtedly enrich our understanding of some issues, although it does not appear to rely on sources revealed after Greaves' death.

What makes George Victor's book especially interesting is that while he presents an unorthodox view of what happened at Pearl Harbor and believes that Roosevelt's actions were duplicitous, he defends those actions. He

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sees FDR as one of the few government leaders at the time who recognized the menace of Hitler (Churchill was another), while also facing the fact that he could not persuade the public to accept what he regarded as a necessary war against Germany. Thus, he allowed the Japanese attack to occur, in order to embroil America in the world conflict.

Victor not only accepts the necessity of the war, but he emphasizes that duplicity on the scale of Roosevelt's deception is routine at the highest national levels in times of crisis. He describes the deceptions of Abraham Lincoln, James Polk, and William McKinley, and he

observes that the Roosevelt administration's failure adequately to defend the Philippines, in spite of promises to do so, resulted in the conquest and occupation of the Philippines, wreaking far greater havoc on the Philippines than on Pearl Harbor. The suggestion that a president would never do something so awful as to allow a surprise attack does not hamper Victor; he takes it off the table — in his view, and in mine.

In considering Victor's book, one should bear in mind that, in addition to the hundreds of significant books and articles that have been written about Pearl Harbor, the public record produced by the 1945–46 congressional inquiry alone consists of 40 volumes (one source says 39, but that's enough). And much of the relevant source material was classified until 1979, when President Carter made available many, though not all, Pearl Harbor records. Another way of measuring the volume of material is by years of research. Gordon Prange spent 37 years researching and writing. After he died, his manuscript, originally 3,500 pages, was edited into a more readable 873. Robert Stinnett spent 17 years on his book. Victor's book, easily accessible and a mere 355 pages long, is inevitably selective. It summarizes a lot of material and presumably omits a lot.

Only experts can accurately determine whether all the summaries are correct and all the selections judicious; and given the heat of the controversy, expert objectivity is somewhat doubtful. But let me illustrate how Victor deals with one issue — and deals with it fairly, I believe. That is the question of whether it was logical to assume that Pearl Harbor might be attacked. Could reasonable people have foreseen an attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor, or was it outside the realm of plausibility?

From the perspective of a novice (and from the perspective of the American people for many years, if not now), the attack has looked like a complete surprise: the Japanese might have been expected to attack the Philippines or Malaysia, but not Hawaii. After the bombing, a number of top leaders claimed that they never expected the U.S. fleet in Hawaii to be attacked.

But they may not have been telling the truth. "Most of those who testified

[in the subsequent inquiries] that they had not expected an attack on Pearl Harbor had, however, written or said in the months preceding it that they did expect it," writes Victor. "And their reports and memos saying so were preserved." He backs that up with a quota-

The suggestion that a president would never deliberately allow a surprise attack doesn't hamper Victor.

tion from the Army Pearl Harbor Board. The board wrote (sarcastically, Victor explains) that "all expected an attack on Pearl Harbor . . . [but] when testifying after the Pearl Harbor attack, they did not expect it." Another piece of evidence is the fact that in 1941 "there were three separate U.S. war games in which 'Japan' attacked the fleet in Hawaii."

What I have read in other books suggests that this is a fair assessment. Pearl Harbor was always considered a possible target, although as war drew near, an attack elsewhere in the Pacific may have been viewed as more likely. For over a generation, in fact, the American people had been periodically scared by the possibility that Japan would someday attack the west coast of the mainland.

In trying to piece together who knew what and when, Victor addresses several key questions, which I'll outline in this way:

Did decoded or deciphered radio messages from Japan indicate to Washington that an attack on Pearl Harbor was imminent?

If not, what other indications may there have been?

If there were such messages or other indications, why did they never reach Lt. Gen. Walter A. Short, commanding general for the Army in Hawaii, and Adm. Husband E. Kimmel, commander in chief of the U.S. fleet, also in Hawaii?

To answer these questions (and others), Victor goes back over a broad array of sources, from interviews to memoirs to the records of the many investigations (eight or nine, depending on

how you count them). His book is full of information. Even so, it must be said, one book is not enough. I have looked at other works, not only to assess their authors' viewpoints but also simply to clarify the cast of characters and the chronology of events.

Much of the debate over Pearl Harbor centers on what messages were intercepted and decoded in the last few days before December 7. Victor argues that there were many signs that the Japanese were going to strike Hawaii. For example, the British seem to have known about the course of the Japanese carriers and to have passed that information on to Washington (we may not know for sure; one possibly important message is sealed until 2060!). William Casey (later CIA director) wrote that the British informed Washington that the "Japanese fleet was steaming east toward Hawaii."

Other messages were the "bomb-plot messages" intercepted by U.S. intelligence. These were detailed descriptions of the location of ships that, Victor says, "provided information to be used in planning bombing runs at warships in Pearl Harbor." Pearl Harbor was only one of the spy locations that sent such information to Tokyo, but it rose in importance when an order sent from Tokyo on Sept. 24, 1941, sought "precise locations of warships at anchor" in Hawaii. This, Victor says, was a "serious warning of a combat attack" on the islands. But the message did not reach the American commanders. Victor writes that in October, "the outgoing director of ONI [the Office of Naval Intelligence], Capt. Alan Kirk, and his subordinate, Capt. Howard Bode, proposed sending to Kimmel the 'bomb-plot' messages, indicating that Pearl Harbor was a likely Japanese target." But the new director did nothing.

Whether the Washington leadership perceived such warnings correctly has always been the question. Victor cites the 1962 book by Roberta Wohlstetter, which emphasizes that too much "noise" can obscure perceptions that become clear only in hindsight. To an extent Victor agrees, and he discounts some fragmentary evidence. But he considers the number of credible messages as overwhelming.

Victor is not terribly concerned about the hotly debated question of

whether Japanese naval messages had been decoded in time to give any warning. That was the assumption of the 2000 book by Robert Stinnett.

Stephen Budiansky, who has written a book, "Battle of Wits" (2000), about the decryption that enabled Americans to win the battle of Midway, disputes the idea that naval messages were read before December 7. In a persuasive article published in *Cryptologia* in April 2000, he reveals how complicated it was to decrypt the Japanese codes. Challenging Stinnett's interpretation of a memo indicating that the code had been solved, Budiansky says that the writer (Adm. Royal Ingersoll) meant merely that the code had been figured out, which was a far cry from actually being able to read any dispatches. Budiansky does not believe that any Japanese naval messages were understood before December 7.

Victor takes a middle position. He thinks that some naval messages may have been decoded, at least to the point of getting the general content. He reports that Cmdr. Joseph Rochefort, chief of the naval intelligence unit in Hawaii, said that his team could read one in ten messages. On the other hand, Victor says that "we may never know" whether relevant messages were decrypted in time.

But there were other signals, most spectacularly the "Purple" or "Magic" diplomatic codes. One of the most famous controversies surrounding Pearl Harbor, the furor over the "winds execute" message, stemmed from a decoded Purple message.

A diplomatic message, decoded in November 1941, laid out a plan: if Japan was about to go to war, the fact would be announced by means of a seemingly routine weather radio broadcast from Tokyo. If the weather report indicated "east wind, rain," it meant that war against the United States was imminent (other directions pointed to war with the Soviet Union and Great Britain). On December 4, an "east wind" message was intercepted, and Cmdr. Laurance F. Safford forwarded it to his superior officer.

The "winds execute" message has figured in most discussions of Pearl Harbor, for two reasons. First, it was based on a diplomatic intercept and an open radio broadcast, so the decrypt-

tion question does not arise. Second, for many years it was one of the few pieces of evidence about pre-Pearl Harbor warnings that were publicly aired and known; it was discussed in the congressional hearing when the issue was still in the public consciousness.

Victor doesn't think this message was all that important — because he thinks that the White House already knew about the impending attack. Even so, he presents it as an illustration of the lengths to which top brass went to suppress information about the attack, even after the war ended.

The first of the eight or nine official inquiries into Pearl Harbor was conducted by the Roberts Commission, which Roosevelt authorized right after the attack. It was pretty clearly an effort to find a scapegoat, and it found two, Short and Kimmel. Later, but still during the war, the Army and Navy, motivated by rumors and by efforts by Short and Kimmel to exonerate themselves, held separate inquiries. The Navy concluded that Kimmel did nothing wrong, and the Army that Short was only partly at fault. He himself admitted that he should have had more experienced radar operators; the two who saw the Japanese planes arrive on December 7 mistook them for American bombers.

But the Army and Navy reports were suppressed during the war, and Victor shows that top-level administrators distorted the findings in their public statements about them. Other

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inquiries were essentially investigations by interested officials. It wasn't until 1945, after the war had ended (and the 1944 presidential election was over), that a joint congressional committee in the Democratic-controlled Congress agreed to initiate an investigation that led to what Victor calls "sensational" hearings. The investigation, Victor notes, provided a wealth of information and "some surprisingly

candid testimony.”

At the hearings, Safford testified that he had seen the “winds execute” message. But he did so at his peril — he wrote later that John Sonnett, counsel for Adm. H. Kent Hewitt, who had conducted his own investigation at the request of the Navy secretary, had tried to get him to change his story. He “attempted to make me believe I was suffering from hallucinations,” said Safford.

Sonnett was unable to get Safford to change his story, but he may have been more successful with Cmdr. Alwin Kramer, who at the naval inquiry had stated firmly that he knew of the message and knew that it meant war. But during the war Kramer had two mental breakdowns (Victor doesn’t say how severe they were). By the time of the congressional testimony his comments were, Victor says, “confused, vague, and self-contradictory.” According to a friend, Kramer told him that he had been ordered to “speak right or undergo more mental treatment.”

Victor reports that Hewitt and Sonnett worked to get other potential witnesses to change their testimony in preparation for the hearings. He also writes that some witnesses were simply prevented from testifying. One person who, according to Safford, knew about the “winds execute” message was Warrant Officer Ralph Briggs, a radio operator. Briggs had intercepted the message (or so he said), but his captain told him not to testify. Victor lists three other people who were reported to have known about the message but were not asked for their testimony.

As might be expected, the conclusions of the congressional inquiry divided mostly along party lines. The majority report, which two Republicans also signed, blamed mostly Short and Kimmel; the minority report also blamed Washington higher-ups. Victor does not name the higher-ups, but, according to Gordon Prange they included the president, for “failure to perform the responsibilities indispensably essential to the defense of Pearl Harbor.”

The final, big question is not whether Short and Kimmel were informed about any of the warnings; it is pretty much undisputed that at least after November 27, they were not. The question is, why? The standard authors, such as

Wohlstetter, take the position that the failures to communicate resulted from a perfect storm of accidental flukes and missteps. In contrast, Victor contends that many decisions not to inform Short and Kimmel were deliberate.

One of the most-discussed issues surrounds the warning sent to Short and Kimmel on November 27. It took the form of two slightly different messages dispatched to them by their superiors. These were warnings of war, but their instructions were ambiguous.

Victor discusses the contents in great detail; I will focus on only one point. Short, whose responsibilities were the defense of Hawaii and of the fleet (Kimmel dealt with the offensive use of the fleet), replied that, in light of the message, he was taking action to avoid sabotage. Thus he was keeping most of the fleet in the harbor — exactly the wrong thing in the case of an impending air attack.

Short received no response from Chief of Staff Marshall to indicate that

Notes on Contributors

Baloo is a *nom de plume* of Rex F. May.

Scott Chambers is a cartoonist living in California.

Robert Chatfield is a Maine-based business owner and adjunct professor of finance.

Stephen Cox is a professor at UC San Diego. His most recent book is *The Big House: Image and Reality of the American Prison*.

Russell Hasan lives in Connecticut. He is currently a student in law school.

Lori Heine is a freelance journalist and playwright from Goldwater country. Her work is most often seen in the LGBT Christian magazines *Whosoever* and *The Epistle*.

Wayland Hunter is a Midwestern university professor.

Gary Jason is a contributing editor of *Liberty*.

John Kannarr is a retired director of information systems and ex-actuarial analyst for an insurance company.

Richard Kostelanetz’s recent books include *Toward Secession; 156 More Political Essays from an Orthodox Anarchist-Libertarian*.

Tom G. Palmer is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, and director of Cato University, the institute’s educational arm.

Bruce Ramsey is author of *Unsanctioned Voice*, the biography of Garet Garrett.

Ted Roberts’ humor appears in newspapers around the United States and is heard on NPR.

Jane S. Shaw is president of the John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy.

Jo Ann Skousen is entertainment editor of *Liberty*. She lives in New York.

Mark Skousen is the author of *The Big Three in Economics* and producer of FreedomFest.

Tim Slagle is a standup comedian living in Chicago. His website is timslagle.com.

Wayne Thorburn is author of the recent history of Young Americans for Freedom, *A Generation Awakes*, to be released in September 2010.

Jim Walsh is an assistant editor of *Liberty*.

Marlaine White is a former government attorney completing a Ph.D. in international relations and comparative politics at the University of Maryland.

Leland B. Yeager is Ludwig von Mises Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Economics at Auburn University.

this policy was wrong. According to Victor, "By War and Navy Department procedures, when a report from the field was received and not responded to, that meant the report was approved." Furthermore, says Victor, Marshall and his staff had "ample opportunities to correct their error," since they saw intercepted reports from Japanese spies in Hawaii indicating that everything was normal at Pearl Harbor; it was not on "air or sea alert."

In congressional testimony after the war, Marshall was asked about Short's response. He at first said that he didn't recall seeing it — until he was shown that its cover sheet was stamped, "Noted — Chief of Staff." In addition, Marshall had sent a copy to Secretary of War Henry Stimson. Marshall never gave the committee a clear explanation of his reaction. He said, "The fact that it was merely sabotage did not register on anybody's mind." Yet according to a biography of Marshall, one of his staff members said, "For God's sake, do you suppose he means that he is only acting to prevent sabotage?"

As December 7 approached, there was mounting information suggesting that war was close and that the Pacific fleet should be on guard. Some intelligence officers were concerned that none of this information appeared to be reaching the commanders. Victor describes efforts by Safford, Adm. Arthur McCollum, and Adm. Theodore Wilkinson to persuade their superiors to make sure that Kimmel was aware of an impending Japanese attack. Even on the morning of December 6, Safford drafted a message for Kimmel announcing the imminence of war, but the message was watered down by Safford's superiors and didn't arrive until December 8.

The culmination of this seemingly deliberate quashing of information occurred in Washington on December 6 and December 7 (the attack occurred at 7:30 a.m. in Hawaii, which was almost 1 p.m. in Washington). These events are redolent with secrecy and deception.

One illustration involves Adm. Harold R. Stark, chief of naval operations, who went to the theater on the night of December 6. At the 1945–46 congressional hearings, Stark first said that he didn't talk with Roosevelt that evening. Later, at the end of the hearings, he changed his testimony, saying that

they did speak on the phone, but not about anything important. However, after Stark's friend, Capt. Harold Krick, who had accompanied him to the theater (along with their wives), told him that his testimony had not been true, he changed his story again. Stark wrote to the committee that "Krick further stated that when I came downstairs after the phone call I said . . . the situation with Japan was very serious." This is quite a lot to slip one's mind, until a friend suggests that the record needs to be sanitized. This phone call was not listed in the White House logs. Further, there is evidence of a late-night (or early-morning) meeting at the White House, one that Stark attended.

The whereabouts and actions of George Marshall are particularly clouded. On Saturday, December 6, an initial "pilot message" from Tokyo was intercepted; it was translated by 2 p.m. on Sunday. It is called the pilot message because it announced that a much longer, 14-part message would follow, as it did. The pilot message led intelligence officials to believe that the longer message would break off negotiations with the United States and thus announce the start of war. A member of the Signal Intelligence Corps wrote later that "it was known in our agency that Japan would surely attack us in the early afternoon of the following day. . . . Not an iota of doubt."

In his congressional testimony, Marshall said that he did not see the pilot message until Sunday. Asked why he didn't, he said, "It was not brought to my attention." Victor points out that, given the importance of the message, his failure to receive it should have led to a reprimand or dismissal of Marshall's staff, but nothing like that happened.

According to Gen. Sherman Miles, Marshall received a "gist" (a short version) of the pilot message on Saturday afternoon. Miles said in congressional testimony, "I think he [General Marshall] is mistaken in saying he did not receive that message on the afternoon of the 6th." Col. Rufus Bratton, charged with delivering the messages to top officials, said later that he had orally informed Marshall of the content of the message on Saturday afternoon. Furthermore, Bratton said that he urged Marshall to send a "war alert." Marshall did not. He said he was going

home and did not want to be disturbed. No one knows for sure where Marshall was, but there is evidence that he spent time that evening at the White House.

Marshall's conduct on Sunday morning, when he did get the full 14-part message (not just the pilot or a gist), is even more puzzling. He told the congressional committee that he had been out riding, as he normally did on Sunday morning, and he could not be reached. Victor says, however, that his route was known and his orderly could reach him. Furthermore, Victor cites three people who said that Marshall was not out riding on Sunday morning; he was in a series of meetings at the War Department.

Gen. Miles, who on Sunday morning brought Marshall the 14th part of the Japanese diplomatic message, announcing the end of negotiations, suggests that Marshall stalled for time. That happened an hour and a half before the 1 p.m. deadline for breaking off negotiations (stated in the intercepted message), which many viewed as the time of attack. Marshall read the message aloud and asked Bratton and Miles what they thought of it. When they urged that commanders in the Philippines, Hawaii, and other places be informed, Marshall called Adm. Stark, who said that additional warnings weren't necessary. Marshall then wrote out a warning for Short, discussed it, and proposed that perhaps it should be typed first (but it apparently

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wasn't). In the end, the message, Victor says, was "hardly worth sending" because of its obscurity; it includes the statement, "Just what significance the hour set may have we do not know." And it didn't reach Short until after the attack had started, anyway.

Victor says that if Bratton and Miles are right, Marshall "performed an elaborate, time-consuming act, which delayed sending a warning," then

delayed it further by choosing to send it by a “secure conveyance,” rather than simply calling Short on the phone. He did not even classify the warning as “urgent.”

Marshall’s conduct, and his vague responses when testifying, are probably the most convincing of all the evidence showing that the Roosevelt administration chose to allow the attack to occur without warning. (The decisive point for me came even before I read Victor’s book. It occurred when I read a footnote in Toland’s account. Toland wrote that Percy Greaves was told that Marshall had remarked “in the men’s room at a social affair that he could not say where he was on the night of December 6 because it might get ‘the Chief’ in trouble.” For me, that explained the vagueness of Marshall’s testimony.) By the time he testified before Congress, Marshall was a war hero and the war itself was over. He got away with being hazy. But history should not be so deferential.

So there we are. It is often observed that Roosevelt wanted the nation to go to war, but faced massive opposition. No one can doubt either part of that statement. The question raised by Victor’s book, and others, is how far Roosevelt was willing to go in order to bring America into the war. Victor argues that Roosevelt allowed the attack on Pearl Harbor to happen without alerting the commanders. He seems to believe that this was a useful, even a necessary, policy. The question at issue is whether that policy was carried out. I believe that it was.

Questions linger, of course. It is still somewhat hard to believe that Kimmel and Short could have been so totally in the dark. But Victor devotes some pages to discussing why they followed the policies they did.

He observes, for example, that Kimmel’s predecessor, Adm. James Richardson, had ordered the fleet to take “full security measures,” which meant giving training less priority than before. This violated his standing orders, which demanded that he concentrate on training, and the violation appears to have been the reason why Roosevelt removed him as commander, replacing him with Kimmel. (Victor also says that Richardson thought that the fleet was being used as a “lure” for

a Japanese attack.)

The question of whether a president could heartlessly allow a surprise attack still nags at some. While the evidence amassed by Victor resolves that question to my satisfaction, he also offers a mitigating factor: The White House may have expected many fewer casualties. Victor notes that the battleship “Arizona” exploded because a bomb reached its magazine; that was

an unlikely event, as was the capsizing of the “Oklahoma.” Those two facts explain the deaths of 1,600 men (out of a total of 2,400 killed by the Japanese attack). Furthermore, it should be remembered that military leaders are usually injured to casualties.

All in all, I think that Victor has it about right. There is a myth surrounding Pearl Harbor, and he has dealt a major blow to it. □

“The Overton Window,” by Glenn Beck. Threshold Editions, 2010, 336 pages.

The Beck Files

Robert Chatfield

Joe Overton was a well respected young leader at a Michigan-based thinktank. Tragically, he died in 2003 in an ultralight aircraft accident at the age of 43, but one of his enduring intellectual contributions was the development of a communications methodology to explain the role of free-market thinktanks.

Overton devised a simple scale to measure the level of freedom created or allowed by any particular public policy. In educational policy, for example, the least amount of freedom is represented by government-run schools with no parental choice, whereas the maximum freedom would be achieved if there was absolutely no government interference in the curriculum, teaching methods, or management of a school system.

For any policy issue, Overton observed that there is only a narrow “window of political possibilities” — everything else is literally outside a politician’s view. The role of thinktanks

is to produce credible research on policy issues that are outside the window, with the goal of moving the window up the scale of freedom. After Joe’s death, the window became widely known as the “Overton Window,” and it was noted that the concept could be applied across many platforms to explain shifts in public attitudes.

Because libertarians and our policy proposals are often regarded as outside the window, the concept should be of interest to us. My own curiosity was piqued by the appearance of a work of fiction entitled “The Overton Window,” which claims that its protagonist must save both the woman he loves and “the individual freedoms he once took for granted.” So far, what’s not to like here?

In this case, however, the author is much more famous than the concept — although I must confess that before reading this book I had never read, seen, or heard anything by him. It’s not that I live under a rock; I just rarely watch Fox News or listen to talk radio,