This past weekend, I was left alone for the first time in a long time thanks to the pandemic, standing sentry to our four dogs, including a puppy, two goats, an angry cat, several chickens and fish, and my own vices. With socializing out of the question, and frankly with nothing else better to do, I tended to our acreage out here in the Texas Hill Country, pruning live oaks and cedars, clearing the tall grass and bramble that had built up after months of neglect post-Ice Storm, paring back the sage that grows like gangbusters in our flower beds, and harvesting some of the prickly pears I’ll later process with tequila.

I coped with my conservatorship like any normal person would: by rereading two non-sequential chapters in “The Path to Power,” the first installment of Robert Caro’s sprawling biography of Lyndon Johnson. One reading comes from “The Trap,” the ominous nickname given to the Hill Country in which Johnson’s forebears started their new lives. It is, bar none, the best description of Central Texas’ geography yet put to paper. Texas had huge tracts of settleable, arable land, and so long as folks were willing to brave the Apache and Comanche raiding parties, they had plenty of places to
choose from. More, the homestead laws enacted in 1838 prevented a person’s land from ever being seized for debt. Win-win! So John Wheeler Bunton, Johnson’s great-great-uncle and leader of the pack, having settled originally in Brenham, Texas, pushed farther west, past the very edge of the frontier, to collect his bounty. Caro writes: “During the 1850s, settlers pushed about 50 miles farther west, to the 98th meridian, where the plains ended and the Texas Hill Country began, and along that meridian, [historian T.R.] Fehrenbach says, for two decades, ‘the frontier wavered, now forward, now back, locked in a bitter battle.’”

But the dreams of Bunton, says Caro, “proved too big for the land to support.” That’s because the Hill Country — the Trap — was fool’s gold. The settlers assumed the abundance of high grass, the webs of creek beds and packs of wildlife would support them as they re-created the plantations of the fertile South. What they didn’t know was that the soil beneath the grass was too thin to support much besides grass; that the hard, mineral-rich limestone underneath the soil was slow to replace it; and that the rainfall west of the 98th meridian was half that of lands just a couple of miles east. (The differences are visible even today. The meridian runs through Austin, where the eastern and western parts are built on fundamentally different foundations. Much of east Austin is built on soft clay, west Austin on pure rock. Not 30 miles east of my house, just past I-35, are legitimate farms the likes of which are completely absent on this side of the meridian.) What rain does come is torrid and unpredictable, and washes away in the blink of an eye what little soil there was to grow on. Put simply, the land tricked settlers into thinking it was much better than it was, and their gullibility cost many of them their lives.

The other chapter is called “The Sad Irons,” which really lives up to its name. In it, Caro describes how hard life was for the residents of the Hill Country, especially for the women who had to tend to their homesteads, because even as late as the latter part of the 1930s the region was almost entirely without electricity. (The utility companies thought the enterprise too expensive.) There were no electric stoves, so wood had to be harvested from felled trees; even boiling water was hard work. There was no refrigeration, so perishable items had to be placed underground with sawdust and ice, which was expensive to the poor farmers. (Recall, too, that the ground is pure rock, so digging underground was, and still is, a nightmare.) Canning was essential to survival, but that required fire and thus wood. There were no lights, so chores had to be done by candlelight – a sometimes dangerous and always unpleasant prospect in the Central Texas heat. There were no automatic washing machines, of course, so water had to be procured from streams or wells, but because the region was so prone to violent flooding, houses were built far from water sources, so it had to be hauled sometimes miles away in rugged terrain. Caro’s interviews show that as bad as this was, nothing was worse than ironing (hence the title of the chapter). Women had to maintain constant,
sooty fires to heat up and then press a seven-pound chunk of iron, frequently injuring or maiming them. Worse, there was essentially no respite from their chores. No movies, no radio. Even reading was difficult. Bear in mind this was at a time when electricity and fire and cars and all other manner of niceties were widely available, just not in the Hill Country.

Johnson would eventually almost single-handedly bring electricity to his ancestral home and thus improve the lives of those who lived here. Some things have never changed, of course. It’s still hot as hell. Gullywashers are a thing. And I’d rather dig my own grave east of I-35 than dig a fencepost in my backyard. But some things do change. After a full day of manual labor, I drank cold water in an air-conditioned house, took a shower, ordered a pizza, draped myself in dogs, and did exactly no laundry.

Cole Altom, managing editor

Resilience

By Bogdan Hrib

Full disclosure: This is a book written by a friend who also happens to be the editor and publisher of my very first (academic) book. But I like to believe there isn’t much subjectivity in writing a review on his latest. In fact, I discovered Bogdan Hrib’s work long before I met him. On my very first visit to the U.S. as a student of international relations in the early 2000s, I found that he was listed as an author on the Balkans, a subject of great interest for me, at the Library of Congress. His was the only Romanian name I could spot on the list. In other words, I’ve been reading his work for longer than
I’ve been reading his messages about deadlines.

However, I haven’t really publicly critiqued his work. In Bucharest, where I live, it’s always been understood that I recommend his writings. Thus, I’ve decided to write this review and explain why this particular book may be of interest for geopolitical readers. First, it is published in English and Romanian, making it accessible to international readers. Second, I find it to be the most geopolitical novel I’ve read in a while about Eastern Europe.

“Resilience” comprises almost all features of interest for anyone trying to understand the region. A thriller first and foremost, the book is built around the mysterious death of a Romanian diplomat in Newcastle. The main character, investigator Stelian Munteanu, who is working closely with Romanian police forces, needs to cooperate with his British counterparts to solve the crime, all while Brexit is unfolding. The plot thickens as the diplomat’s father, a notorious businessman, is killed in Bucharest several weeks after his daughter’s suspicious death abroad. This gives the author the opportunity to describe how the web of shady business intertwines with international politics.

As the action moves from London, Newcastle, Bucharest and Iasi, the author paints the local flavors of each city, focusing on the socio-economic and political environment that surrounds the case. With a Polish character whose business intersects with the case, the book even talks about the New Intermarium – the strategy that is supposed to secure the new containment line against Russian influence. Occasionally, “Resilience” also talks about the way social media manipulation and fake news are contributing to social instability and thus increasing the regional geopolitical risk.

Overall, the book is very entertaining and easy to read. The English translation might not always provide the full nuance of the original Romanian manuscript, but that’s only apparent to someone having read both. Otherwise, the text offers a good amount of context for those not familiar with Eastern Europe. For a geopolitical analyst, it was useful to read and think about the perception that the locals may have on those grand strategy plans we talk about in our analysis. It’s the details that help such plans succeed, after all; understanding those details gets the right answers when it comes to geopolitical forecasting.

Antonia Colibasanu, chief operating officer

Authors: Cole Altom and Antonia Colibasanu

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