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The Finger in the Dike Election

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The Stakes: America at the Point of No Return

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On September 11, 2001, United Airlines Flight 93's passengers defied armed hijackers and fought to take over the cockpit regardless of danger or odds because they realized that certain death was the alternative. Michael Anton's 2016 essay "The Flight 93 Election," written for the *Claremont Review of Books* and later expanded into a book, argued that although Americans did not know what kind of president Donald Trump would be, they should risk all to elect him because they could be very sure that the alternative would be our republic's death.

In his new book, *The Stakes: America at the Point of No Return*, Anton, now a lecturer and research fellow at Hillsdale College, again urges Americans to vote for Trump, disappointed though they may be with his performance, because they know even better than before how much this country's ruling class would use control of the presidency to hurt us in our private and public lives for having dared to reject their mastery. Trump, imperfect as he is, is like a finger in a dike that, if removed, would loose a deluge. Anton describes how the Democratic Party-led complex of public-private power has been transforming our free, decent, and prosperous country into its opposite—and how it's going to do to the rest of America what it has already largely accomplished in California. In the book's final chapters, he lays out several paths that the current struggle for America's future might take.

Anton's commentary on the 2020 election does not belabor the obvious: it is a binary choice. The unprecedented level of opposition President Trump has faced explains, but does not excuse, some of his shortcomings. As Anton puts it: "[t]here's little wrong with President Trump that more Trump couldn't solve." Then he adds what is really radically new about the 2020 election: should the Democrats win, the ruling Left—which includes just about everyone who controls American government and society's commanding heights—is ready, willing, and eager to implement plans that would make it virtually impossible for conservatives ever to win national elections again. These plans include the importation and counting of non-citizen voters. Elections-by-mail would shift power from voters to those who count the votes, just like in Venezuela. Though reelecting Trump makes the republic's survival possible, and preserves all manner of good options, it guarantees nothing. Trump's defeat guarantees disaster—like in 2016, only much more so.

The bulk of this well-written book juxtaposes accounts of life under what had been the American constitutional regime with the ruling-class politics that have gone a long way to destroy it. It opens with a bittersweet description of California, then and now. Anton, a young man, is old enough to remember it a near-paradise. Those of a certain age have even more idyllic memories of the Golden State's unrivaled beauty and plenty, crowned by freedom, ease, and safety. Millions flocked to work and raise families here.

Yet in 2020 productive middle-class families are fleeing California—so much so that the state will probably lose a seat in the House of Representatives after this year's census. And all because its government—controlled by oligarchs in the entertainment and high-tech industries, as well as the state bureaucracy and public sector labor unions—raised taxes, imposed regulations, let public services decay, stopped defending against criminals, and empowered left-wing social activists. Today's California is for government-favored oligarchs and those who service them. You want a career? If you don't conform every word and action to the ruling orthodoxies, your work and talents will be wasted. You want your children to grow up intelligent and decent? The schools will teach them little reasoning and much depravity. Like you, they will also learn to compete by favor-seeking rather than by performance. You see crime rising, sense that you have to protect yourself, but know that, in most of the state, the police will arrest you for it. And you are sick of paying for it all. That is why you want to emigrate from California into the United States of America.

Having held up California as the example of what full-throttle liberalism looks like, Anton offers a defense of the American regime in the face of criticisms from what one might call the nativist Right as well as from the Left. Impressive in its logic and concise in its comprehensiveness, it shows the partial truths on which these critiques are based in the full light of history. All that the United States *is* really does follow from the founding generation's understanding of human beings' inalienable equality before God. The principle of majority rule has no other foundation. Already by the time of the founding, however, America, like every other nation, had acquired a distinct character—language, religion, and customs—that it meant to preserve and defend. A nation of immigrants, to be sure. But the country was never open to just anybody for any reason. Anton cites the 1795 Naturalization Act that specifies agreement with the Constitution and disposition to help the country as conditions for admission. For almost 200 years the Constitution, the American people's basic "deal" with one another, channeled our strivings and disagreement into deliberations and compromises that allowed us to live the mostly decent lives our culture prescribed. Adherence to its restraints preserved our capacity to continue dealing with problems in more or less predictable freedom.

But, beginning in the 1930s, America's ruling class pushed aside the Constitution, reducing to a bad joke the civics class description of the regime: "Congress makes the laws, the President enforces them, and the courts resolve individual disputes about them." In today's America, Anton writes,

> *The real power…resides not with elected (or appointed) officials and "world leaders"; they—or most of them—are a servant class. The real power resides with their donors, the bankers, CEOs, financiers, and tech oligarchs—some of whom occasionally run for and win office, but most of whom, most of the time, are content to buy off those who do. The end result is the same either way: economic globalism and financialization, consolidation of power in an ostensibly "meritocratic" but actually semi-hereditary class, livened up by social libertinism.*

This ruling class now explicitly denies that "all men are created equal." It asserts for itself the right to rule by decree by virtue of expertise, and the power to assign different rights and obligations to classes of people, "protected" and less so.

Despising any divine or natural authority and contemptuous of America's history, those in the ruling class make war on the American people's culture and national identity. Ironically, this ruling class, led almost exclusively by white men, have cast white men in general as the proper targets of universal vengeance—an inversion of reality sustained by a near-monopoly of power over corrupt institutions and mass communications. Anton's section on "Propaganda and Censorship: Narrative, Megaphone, and Muzzle" is particularly worth reading.

He then proceeds to a CT scan of the ruling class and its entourage. Detailed understanding of its components' relations to one another is essential to understanding the book's main argument about the how this class might weather the challenges that its own increasing power creates. Anton's description of the ruling class—of its intellectual/social origins, its organic and patronage connection with government, its clientelistic relationship with its various components—is consistent with my 2010 book of that title, but it is richer and livelier in its detail. It leaves no doubt about the fraud at the heart of this class's claim of authority:

> *Their own fancy degrees are proof of their superior intelligence, which in turn is the foundation of their title to rule. Intelligence is not simply a matter of ability but also of opinions and tastes: smart people all think the same way about the most important things because to be smart is to understand, and to understand is to agree. Therefore those who disagree are either dumb or—if obviously intelligent in a raw-horsepower way—crazy.… [T]he ruling class makes a desultory effort to find outsider talent—especially from "protected classes"—to welcome into the ranks. That way they can deny the otherwise obvious, and grave, charge that they are a self-perpetuating closed caste.… But mostly the ruling class replenishes itself from within.… Harvard today has a legacy admissions rate of nearly 30 percent.… This is the ruling class taking care of its own. For all the paeans to "diversity," this is what it's really all about. As the dean of Harvard College…explained when challenged on why upper-income students outnumber poorer kids six-to-one, "We're not trying to mirror the socioeconomic or income distribution of the United States." …[N]ext in line are promising members of certain demographic groups…by far the most underserved demographic on elite campuses are rural and red-state whites—a fact confirmed by simply comparing National Merit Scholarship data (a record of the highest-achieving high school seniors every year) with elite college admission rates by race and region.*

This ruling class wants, above all, to insulate itself from competition. Hence, not only does it allow access to its ranks only to non-threatening, somewhat inferior successors, it does its best to denature, defang, and dishearten the ruled. Anton observes:

> *The current porn-drug tsunami is an evil much too great and deliberate to be called a failure. Its purpose is to deaden you—to drain you of any sense of dignity, self-worth, fighting spirit, or inner belief that you are worthy of respect. Above all, it's to render you unwilling to stand up and demand—to fight for—what you're owed as a human being and citizen.*

Holding together its own subordinates, controlling its instruments—its hands and feet—is an even bigger concern for the ruling class. Anton examines this problem from a novel angle. Instead of asking what the heads of the class can do to control their several presumed demographic components—blacks, unmarried women, bureaucrats, etc.—he asks what motivates all their members. In each and in all of these demographics, some just "want stuff," others are committed to "woke" ideological agendas, and yet others simply want to avenge their hate. The heads of the class have bet that they can satisfy all these motivations by giving just enough to each in order to keep them in line while they enjoy the perquisites of power. But then Anton asks:

> *Even if the ruling class can, Brazil-like, retreat behind walls, gates, helicopter pads, and armed guards to spare themselves actual violence, what happens to the surrounding economy on which their wealth and status depend? What happens when and if the Freeloaders are fully fed? Wokerati enthusiasm fully indulged? Avenger animosities taken to their logical extremes?*

This is the subject of Chapters 6 and 7.

But before we get there, Anton gives us a remarkable chapter on how thoroughly latter-day immigration has scrambled all things American. His point is that the past half-century's immigration—very differently from our prior policy—seems to have been intended to do just that. This, he argues, not only degrades ordinary Americans' lives, it also throws a wild card into the ruling class's own plans for control—of which their approach to immigration is arguably the key element. In short, the ruling class has unleashed a bunch of tigers on America, which for now it is riding. Whether and for how long it can stay on their backs and not end up in their bellies is an open question. This is true, Anton ably shows, whether present trends continue (the subject of Chapter 6) or even if they don't (Chapter 7). He has already left no doubt that the odds are stacked in favor of the ruling class continuing its dismantling of America as we knew it—that for most of us the result is likely to be worse than California with lousy weather. With these two chapters he turns his attention to how the odds might play out in the face of problems with the rulers' own constituencies or with resistance by conservatives.

Had he conceived these chapters once the ruling class's mid-2020 offensive had flourished, the turbo-charging effect that this offensive has had on ruling class constituencies might well have convinced him to collapse them into one because it is now beyond anyone's capacity more or less gently to ride the past decades' trends to total power. Even if increased ruling class power were to augment rather than diminish the U.S. economy's capacity to deliver more "stuff" to the rulers' "freeloaders"; even if the rulers could fulfill every woke fantasy yet uttered, or hurt every known conservative, the freeloaders now so accustomed to taking could not stay sated, and new awokenings would conjure new fantasies. The destruction of enemies has never failed to whet the insatiable appetite for more. At this point, policing their own would require our rulers to be copies of Stalin. They don't have the grit for that.

They do not believe they have to worry about controlling their own violent troops because they are sure that they have nothing to fear from conservatives. That is because conservatives have continued to believe that the United States's institutions and those who run them retain legitimacy. Conservative complaisance made possible a half-century of Progressive rule's abuse. The War on Poverty ended up enriching its managers while expanding the underclass that voted for them. The civil rights movement ended up entitling a class of diversity managers to promote their friends and ruin their opponents. The environmental movement ended up empowering the very same wealthy, powerful folks while squeezing the rest of America into cookie cutter living and paying inflated energy prices. The feminist movement delivered divorce and abortion—far from benefiting women, it has made millions dependent on ruling class favor. The COVID-19 pandemic has had almost nothing to do with public health and almost everything to do with separating, impoverishing, and disconnecting people inclined to vote against the ruling class. As leftist judges rule, conservatives respond by appointing judges who pledge not to rule. As leftist governors establish their brand of effective sovereignty by decree, conservative ones obey court orders. So long as, and to the degree that, the illusion of legitimacy stands—so long as the Right obeys while the Left disobeys and commands—there is no end to what the Left can do because there is so little that conservatives do to fight back.

But, as Michael Anton reminds us, things that can't go on indefinitely almost surely won't. The combination of the ruling class constituents' fired-up insatiability, the rulers' inability to control them, and the limits of conservative Americans' patience is sure to cause a crisis that ends up in some kind of "Caesarism" of the Left or the Right.

Speculating on what such a crisis might be is not terribly useful because revolutionary scenarios are really all alike, and have been described countless times in similar terms: All sides are readier than they know to pursue their desires by dispensing with order. Something happens that inflames one side and challenges the other. Somebody gets killed. All bets are off.

Consider the 2020 election. In July, the Democratic National Committee engaged some 600 lawyers to litigate the outcome, possibly in every state. No particular outcome of such litigations is needed to set off a systemic crisis. The existence of the litigations themselves is enough for one or more blue state governors to refuse to certify that state's electors to the Electoral College, so as to prevent the college from recording a majority of votes for the winner. In case no winner could be confirmed by January's Inauguration Day, the 20th Amendment provides that Congress would elect the next president. Who doubts that, were Donald Trump the apparent winner, and were Congress in Democratic hands, that this would be likelier than not to happen?

Before or afterward, were conservatives not unanimously to roll over, and were a few incidents to result in loss of life and conflict between police forces on opposite sides of the affairs, America might well experience an explosion of pent-up rage less like the American Civil War of the 19th century and more like the horror that bled Spain in the 20th.

This review is a special preview of the forthcoming Fall 2020 issue of the Claremont Review of Books.

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