



# THE BULWARK

## What the Hell Happened to the Claremont Institute?

*How the once-distinguished conservative think tank plunged into Trumpism, illiberalism, and lying about the election.*

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**J**UST BEFORE 11 O’CLOCK ON THE MORNING of January 6—an hour before President Donald Trump began riling up his “Save America” rally in front of the White House, and two and a half hours before the U.S. Capitol was overrun—Rudy Giuliani spoke to the rallygoers. By his side on the dais stood John C. Eastman, then a law professor at Chapman University and a visiting scholar at the Benson Center for the Study of Western Civilization at the University of Colorado Boulder. Wearing a dark suit with a red striped tie, a red and cream paisley scarf, a camel overcoat, and a brown brimmed hat, Professor Eastman cut a suave figure next to the grimacing man who, two decades and a lifetime ago, had been dubbed America’s Mayor.

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According to Giuliani's introductory remarks, Professor Eastman's job that day was to explain what had happened the night before in Georgia: "How they [the Democrats] cheated and how it was exactly the same as what they did on November 3rd." Eastman took to his task with gusto. Chopping the air with his hands, he asserted that dead people had voted and that state election officials had ignored or violated state law. But his main focus was the voting machines. According to Eastman, the "old way" of doing fraud "was to have a bunch of ballots sittin' in a box under the floor," but now "they put those ballots in a secret folder in the machines." From there, Eastman's theory goes like this: When 99 percent of the vote was in, the Democrats pulled a trick. By this point they knew who had and hadn't voted, and they knew how many more votes would be needed for Democrats to take the lead in the count. So they paused the counting, took out their stash of electronic ballots, matched each of "those unvoted ballots with an unvoted voter," and "put them together in the machine," marked as Democratic votes. "And voila! We have enough votes to barely get over the finish line. We saw it happen in real time last night, and it happened on November 3rd as well!" At one point he elaborated: "You don't see this on Fox or any of the other stations" but you can see it in "the data."

Eastman, who had reportedly spent the day before in the Oval Office arguing to Vice President Mike Pence that he had authority to intervene in the counting of the Electoral College vote, ended with an impassioned plea for Pence to allow state legislators to look into these matters, so that "we get to the bottom of it, and the American people know whether we have control of the direction of our government or not." Eastman became very animated, pumping his fists and yelling:

We no longer live in a self-governing republic if we can't get the answer to this question! This is bigger than President Trump! It is the very essence of our republican form of government, and it has to be done! And anybody that is not willing to stand up to do it does not deserve to be in the office! It is that simple!

As wild as this presentation was—with a tenured law professor arguing that the only way to preserve our system of government is for Congress to heed conspiracists—Eastman's moment was one of the tamer parts of the rally. Everyone knows what followed.

After the mob attack of January 6, Professor Eastman, under pressure, resigned from his faculty position at Chapman University. He was also stripped of his public duties at the University of Colorado Boulder (for which action he is reportedly preparing to sue).

But one place where he is still welcome is the Claremont Institute. Eastman is a senior fellow at the four-decade-old conservative think tank; a member of its board of directors; and the founding director of its Center for Constitutional Jurisprudence, a shingle under which he sporadically files lawsuits and amicus

briefs. When Eastman resigned from Chapman, he defended himself in the *American Mind*, a Claremont web magazine. In Claremont's flagship publication, the *Claremont Review of Books* (CRB), one of the institute's foremost scholars, Charles C. Kesler, defended him in turn. Eastman may be persona non grata at institutions wary of anti-democratic conspiracy theorists, but at the Claremont Institute he fits right in.

Some of the people affiliated with Claremont—like Eastman and much of the CRB crowd—are tenured academics with long careers in the classroom. Others—especially those who form the chorus in the *American Mind*—are controversialists habituated to today's right-wing modes of arguing and trolling. People from both categories have spent the past five years giving intellectual succor to Donald Trump. Many of the people associated with Claremont, including several of its most prominent figures, have gone all in for MAGA—some even embracing its most authoritarian, paranoid, and racist strands.

The Claremont Institute used to be one of the principal places for conservative intellectuals to come together. It was founded by scholars who were taken seriously even by people who disagreed with them, and some such scholars still publish in the pages of the CRB. That Claremont has been unparalleled in its intellectual submission to Trumpism should give us pause. After all, in some respects the Claremont crowd is precisely the sort who should have known better: deeply read in political philosophy and history, and familiar with the many warning signs that Trump would be a damaging and divisive president. There is also a sense, however, in which the Claremont crowd's submission to Trump was the most predictable thing in the world—the simple culmination of a political theory rooted in jingoism and denial.

Either way, the story of Claremont's embrace of Trumpism is a long and complicated one. But with Claremont growing—arguably in influence and certainly institutionally—and with Trump-style politics continuing to dominate American conservatism, even six months after the violent attack on the seat of government, understanding what happened at Claremont is more than just an interesting case study in the time-worn problem of wannabe tyrants and intellectual subversion to power. What happened at Claremont is also of serious practical concern for anyone interested in the democratic future of the country.

**T**he Claremont Institute was founded in 1979 by Peter W. Schramm, Thomas B. Silver, Christopher Flannery, and Larry P. Arnn, all students of Lincoln scholar Harry V. Jaffa. (Despite the shared name and many overlapping personnel, the Claremont Institute has no formal affiliation with Claremont McKenna College and the other Claremont colleges, which are reputable institutions of higher learning.) Jaffa's work on Abraham Lincoln was groundbreaking, and can be credited for recovering a sense of Lincoln's intellectual seriousness, the depth and magnitude of his person, and his extraordinary political capabilities. A student of the political theorist Leo Strauss, Jaffa is also considered the

founder of the so-called “West Coast Straussian” school of thought (full disclosure: while pursuing my doctorate in political theory and public law from the University of Texas at Austin, I studied with so-called “East Coast Straussians”). Whereas Strauss is known for a revival of the natural right tradition that includes its many attendant challenges and perplexities, West Coast Straussians tend to embrace natural right as settled truth. Jaffa and his students further insist that the American Founders were able to bring ancient political thought and Judeo-Christian thinking into a fruitful type of coexistence (one scholar playfully refers to Jaffa as achieving a synthesis of “Athens, Jerusalem, and Peoria”). In addition to elevating Lincoln, West Coast Straussians are singular in their attachment to the American Founding and the Founding Fathers, both of which, for them, represent something truly unparalleled and exemplary in the political history of the world: a modern, constitutional, popular government built upon the high ideals of liberty and virtue.

The flipside of the group’s attachment to their heroic American forebears and to (what they view as) American principles of natural right is an overwhelming distrust of anything that smacks of (what they view as) Hegelian historicism or statism. The idea that principles or truth might have a historical, changing, or perspectival character is anathema to the thinkers at Claremont, who have long stood in defiance of both “the living Constitution” and the “administrative state.”

Today, the Claremont Institute describes itself as dedicated to the restoration of “the principles of the American Founding to their rightful, preeminent authority in our national life.” And the organization’s orientation is fundamentally anti-wonk: “Rather than concentrate on policy like many other think tanks, the Claremont Institute teaches the principles and ideas that shape policy over time.” This is a group with grand, culture-shaping ambitions:

The Claremont Institute provides the missing argument in the battle to win public sentiment by teaching and promoting the philosophical reasoning that is the foundation of limited government and the statesmanship required to bring that reasoning into practice.

In keeping with these lofty goals, the organization runs a number of programs and fellowships for educating “the best and most promising young writers, lawyers, activists, academics, entrepreneurs, and public servants.” Hundreds of journalists and thinkers have passed through Claremont’s Publius, Lincoln, John Marshall, and speechwriter programs. Some very smart and thoughtful people—like Ross Douthat—have been fellows at the institute; so have Josh Hammer, Mollie Hemingway, Christopher Rufo, and Ben Shapiro.

An indication of where things stand today: In 2019, Claremont welcomed as a Lincoln Fellow the conspiracist and “king of fake news” Jack Michael Posobiec III. Posobiec, already well known as a promoter of the Pizzagate hoax and the

Seth Rich conspiracy theory, was then working as a correspondent and host for the One America News Network (OANN), which became one of the major promoters of false claims about the 2020 election. Claremont remains proud of the affiliation with Posobiec, with an institute official recently calling him “one of the best public political voices in America” —just days before it was revealed that a right-wing website Posobiec frequently promoted was a Russian disinformation project.

And among the latest crop of Lincoln Fellows is Charlie Kirk, the founder of the right-wing youth-mobilizing group Turning Point USA. Kirk bragged about sending “80+ buses full of patriots to DC to fight” for Trump on January 6. After his slimy “Falkirk Center,” co-founded with Jerry Falwell Jr., imploded, Kirk was ousted from Liberty University. The Claremont Institute has welcomed him with open arms.

The institute’s best-known scholar is Michael Anton, author of the infamous “Flight 93 Election” essay. The essay, published pseudonymously on the *CRB* website, provided a rare intellectual defense of Trump and was promoted by Rush Limbaugh in the months leading up to November 2016. Its premise was that Democrats posed a threat to the country analogous to the 9/11 terrorists, and that the election of Hillary Clinton would mean certain death for America (“a Hillary Clinton presidency is Russian Roulette with a semi-auto. With Trump, at least you can spin the cylinder and take your chances”). After the election, Anton spent a little over a year in the Trump White House, but when that didn’t pan out, he joined the Claremont Institute (which, in addition to Hillsdale College, he described as his “first love and second family”). Now a Claremont senior fellow and a lecturer at Hillsdale’s Kirby Center in Washington, D.C., Anton helped to propagate Trump’s “stop the steal” campaign last year.

Anton and others at Claremont were intellectual cheerleaders for Trump, and so Trump returned the favor. He tweeted out praise for Anton’s 2019 book, an expanded version of the “Flight 93” essay. He awarded the institute a National Humanities Medal. He appointed the former president of Claremont, Michael Pack, to head U.S. global media, with scandalous results. He put *CRB* editor Charles Kesler and Claremont cofounder (and Hillsdale president) Larry Arnn on the controversial 1776 Commission.

Trump is out of office now, but the Claremont Institute is still going strong. Earlier this year Claremont opened a new office in Washington called the Center for the American Way of Life. (More about that later.) All in all, today the institute appears to be in a stronger political position than ever, despite—or because of—the fact that people affiliated with it have peddled the kind of lies and conspiratorial thinking that eat away at reasoned discourse and sound republican judgment. It’s worth taking a much closer look at what they’ve been up to.

In what follows, I begin in the present, with Charles Kesler’s halfhearted effort to distance himself from Trump in the aftermath of January 6. I then turn to discuss the institute’s involvement in developing and perpetuating Trump’s post-election lies. I follow this with a brief treatment of the group’s shameful



indulgence of extreme rhetoric, fringe individuals, and white supremacy, all of which are inseparable from Claremont's blinkered account of 1776.

## I. January 6 and Charles Kesler's Dodgy Apologetics

It is hard to describe the heady combination of awe and repulsion brought on by a visit to the Claremont Institute's web pages. On any given day, with any given click, one is all but guaranteed to encounter a dizzying mélange of sophisticated verbosity and pure partisan hackery. There must be a German word for it—a word to describe the disconcerting pleasure we take in another's extraordinary shamelessness, or the simple sadness that arrives upon witnessing the decadence of gifted minds leading others astray. There's also just something plain funny about Claremont's mix of dispassionate erudition and grubbing political rot. Whatever else we might conclude about the place, the affective whole of the Claremont universe is greater than the sum of its parts.

Charles R. Kesler is one person to thank for this. Kesler has been the editor of the *Claremont Review of Books* since its launch in 2000. A senior fellow at the Claremont Institute, Kesler is also a professor of government at Claremont McKenna College and the former longtime director of the college's Salvatori Center for the Study of Individual Freedom in the Modern World. Along with most of the senior leadership of the Claremont Institute, though in a more genteel and hedging way, Kesler has been a supporter of President Trump.

For Kesler, the January 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol posed some distinct professional and intellectual challenges. After all, Kesler was the editor who had greenlit the publication of Anton's "Flight 93" essay, full of violent imagery, back in 2016; Kesler had predicted in the *New York Times* in early 2020 that Trump would position himself as the "defender of American democracy"; scholars who were affiliated with the Claremont Institute and wrote for Kesler's publication, like Eastman and Anton, spread falsehoods about the 2020 election for weeks; and what's more, Kesler had a book coming out in February in which he would present Trump as a possible agent, still, of political health and constitutional recovery.

In the book, *Crisis of the Two Constitutions: The Rise, Decline, and Recovery of American Greatness*, Kesler rails against contemporary liberalism as catastrophic ("its hostility extends to the theological, philosophical, literary, and scientific heritage of the West"; "this [the anti-American Left] plunged its knife into our politics in the 1960s and has been twisting it ever since"; "increasingly, the effect of higher education is to turn our own children into aliens, and hostile ones at that") and supports the idea of a new founding and counterrevolution on the part of American conservatives. In his final chapter, "Thinking about Trump," which originally appeared as a *CRB* essay in 2018, Kesler praises Trump's outsider status, his sense of humor, his courage, his partiality ("courage in defense of one's own"), his unapologetic love for America ("Trump alone among the 2016 candi-

dates took an unflinching, *proud* stand against the multicultural dissolution and loathing of America”), his confidence in American principles, his sense of justice, and his shrewd politics. Kesler begins the chapter by coyly mocking those who saw something “dangerous” in Michael Anton’s rhetoric (which Kesler defends as merely “galvanizing” and metaphorical; after all, “almost any spirited political appeal involves an element of exaggeration for effect”). And he blames conservatives for their excessive torpor.

After the events of January 6, those words read quite differently.

In apparent recognition of Trump’s fall from grace, Kesler wrote and published what at first blush appears to be a *mea culpa* in the Winter 2020/21 issue of the *CRB*. The essay provides a good window into the Claremont world, because it demonstrates how far even a smart man like Kesler is willing to go in defending Trump, as well as the style of argumentation that Claremont’s Trump supporters typically use to make their case.

Entitled “After January 6: The future of Trump and Trumpism,” the article begins with a sober acknowledgement of the ugliness of the attack on the Capitol.

Kesler strongly condemns the insurrectionists (“No citizen, no constitutionalist, no conservative could regard that day’s outrages with anything but dismay and indignation”); he disavows mob violence; and he offers some tepid, indirect rebukes of Trump (“No petitions had been prepared to present to their members of Congress. No preparations had been made to organize protests by, or to address, a crowd of that size, or even to contain them safely.”).

But Kesler quickly pivots—criticizing the Democrats and challenging the legitimacy of the second Trump impeachment.

Kesler is not persuaded that Trump is guilty of incitement of violence. By the end of the essay, Kesler’s summary criticism against Trump is that he was “reckless” in calling a rally for the very day Congress would be meeting, as well as for encouraging the crowd to march to the Capitol absent clear preparations for what should happen next. Kesler eventually concedes that “there is persuasive evidence” that Biden did win the election. But in the course of all this, he avoids any real confrontation with the former president’s dereliction of duty on January 6 and his ongoing refusal to concede the election. Further, Kesler’s gentle rebukes of the former president allow him the rhetorical space to circle back to the question of election fraud.

In the full course of Kesler’s article, a problematic tension emerges: Kesler is willing to condemn the mob violence at the Capitol, and he maintains a hesitant tone throughout, but he is not convinced that Trump’s claims about election fraud were wrong. Kesler does a very fancy dance throughout the piece to avoid stating the matter plainly, but his view appears to be that the “stop the steal” movement had some legitimacy. One subsection of the piece is entitled “Finding the Fraud,” and rather than conclude that the “search” for fraud was misguided, Kesler’s basic take is that we’ll never know for sure. Here is a telling passage:

Speaker Pelosi and her allies called [Trump’s statements about election fraud] “false claims.” . . . Nonetheless, she and her colleagues could not ignore these so-called false—or to use other adjectives in favor with Trump’s critics—baseless, absurd, and discredited claims. Truth is, of course, that claims are “baseless” only until such time as a base of evidence appears for them.

This is the backbone of Kesler’s always-hedging argument: that evidence of widespread election fraud—and hence of Donald Trump’s victory—is quite possibly merely in a state of delay.

It is worth lingering for a moment on Kesler’s extraordinary epistemological proposition that “claims are ‘baseless’ only until such time as a base of evidence appears for them.” If the proposition is true, then it means that we can never really know anything, because any contrary claim could also always be true, pending the eventual appearance of evidence. It’s about as radical a form of doubt as can be—a kind of skepticism that might well have pride of place in a philosophy class but that has volatile political implications.

Kesler devotes a good part of that essay to defending the notion that the jury is still out with respect to widespread election fraud—despite the fact that no proof had been discovered by the time he was writing (nor in the months since). Kesler does at one point concede that “extraordinary claims demand extraordinary proof,” but then goes on to declare that: “Perhaps a national commission of inquiry or legislative investigations in the states may eventually discover such proof.” Then he further laments: “At this point, it looks unlikely. Our political system is simply not designed to handle claims of systemic electoral fraud, and certainly not by January 20 at noon, the date set by the Constitution for one presidency to end and the next to begin.” The best evidence Kesler ever gives for the problem of systemic voter fraud is the fact that there were allegations—allegations which, it bears emphasizing, Claremont was committed to amplifying.

**T**here were some instances of fraudulent voting and other irregularities in the 2020 election, as there are in just about every big election. There is evidence of a very small amount of voter fraud in our massive democracy. But the claims and elaborate theories of widespread electoral fraud in 2020 are still rightly called baseless. They are baseless because no credible evidence has been found for anything close to the amount of fraud that it would take to influence election outcomes. They are baseless because officials in Trump’s own administration charged with election security issued a joint statement on November 12 declaring the 2020 election to be “the most secure in American history.” They are baseless because Trump’s sixty-plus legal efforts to prove the contrary were thrown out of court. They are baseless because thousands of election officials and state legislators, from both parties and everywhere in the country, stood by the election results—many in the face of extraordinary political pressure, and,



in some instances, threats to themselves and their families. They are baseless because common sense dictates that election officials of both parties will be hyperattentive and receptive to legitimate claims of fraud; when partisans stand by the election results, it makes good sense to trust them.

At one point in the essay, Kesler refers to Trump's theory of the stolen election as "novel" and "complex," and identifies Eastman as its "principal author." Again, consider the cynicism and nihilism necessary to believe in that theory—or even to take it seriously as a possibility, as Kesler attempts to do. You must believe that our institutions are so top-to-bottom corrupt that nothing and no one is worthy of civic trust. Not the neighbors who served as election observers, not the poll workers, not county officials, not city governments, not state legislators, and certainly not Republicans in Congress. This is conspiracism in its most unaccountable form.

At times, it's almost as though Kesler sees the problem. For example, he does go to some length to draw a distinction between his own people ("intelligent and experienced lawyers" like Eastman and Cleta Mitchell) and others ("kooks and conspiracy theorists" who joined Trump's "free-floating legal team"). He chooses not to discuss the voting machines that Eastman was so interested in when he stood next to Giuliani on January 6, instead focusing on state legislators' alleged *perceptions* of fraud. Obviously a lot—everything, actually—rides on whether there were legitimate grounds for any of these beliefs, but Kesler skirts that question. Furthermore, he explains, still in defense of Eastman, that no one was asking Vice President Mike Pence "to single-handedly reverse the election, but to pause the process of counting long enough for the state legislatures to clarify for whom their states had actually voted." The problem is that the Electoral College vote was not in dispute. Kesler is eager to defend the Trump/Eastman theory as something reasonable despite its having no basis in reality.

The thing that Kesler never says out loud is this: If one were really to believe that Eastman and Trump's theory was legitimate—that Trump was the real victor and all of the surrounding events truly were a conspiracy to overthrow American democracy—wouldn't such extraordinary events justify the violence, at least in part? If you're a patriot, and you've been listening to Anton and Eastman and Trump, and you think that your country is being stolen, probably forever, what else are you supposed to do? As R. Shep Melnick, a professor of American politics at Boston College, put it in a review of Kesler's book, Kesler's arguments "can easily be read as a justification for storming the corrupted seat of power in hopes of restoring American greatness." So too with Kesler's post-hoc discussion of January 6. Whether intellectuals such as Kesler believe in violence or not is beside the point; what matters is how readers understand and choose to act on rhetoric that plays with fire. And the question still remains: Does Kesler think the mass fraud stuff is true, or doesn't he? Should he get to have it both ways?

Kesler has already tried, in a response to Melnick, to use his denunciation of the January 6 rioters to deflect blame away from himself and from Claremont. He argues that no one has been identified "who was moved to break the law by the

Claremont Institute's various writings," and protests that his own book wasn't published until "more than a month after the Capitol Hill riot." This is technically true, but misleading: The book is largely a reprinting of his prior published work. As for the Claremont Institute's "various writings," I will have more to say about them below, but no one is arguing that Claremont was the proximate cause of, or criminally culpable for, anyone's law-breaking on January 6. Rather, the point is that the Claremont group contributed to the spread of lies about the election, and in general consistently fails to live up to a threshold level of sound judgment and civic responsibility.

**T**he most uncomfortable thing about Kesler's essay, besides its squirrely non-defense of "stop the steal," is its subservience to Trump. (The same is true of Kesler's new book, in which, for example, he explains that "Trump wants to make great deals, build beautiful buildings, and shine in the public eye as a kind of benefactor. You might say he is interested in magnificence, not magnanimity.") Even after the events of January 6, Kesler can't help but toady to the former president, going so far as to treat Trump's bizarre rant that day as morally serious and worthy of theoretical investigation, analysis, and interpretation. Let's take a moment to look at Kesler's interpretive commentary on one passage in Trump's angry, rambling, and mob-inciting speech at his Stop the Steal rally. Here are Trump's words:

Today we see a very important event though. Because right over there [in the U.S. Capitol], right there, we see the event going to take place. And I'm going to be watching. Because history is going to be made. We're going to see whether or not we have great and courageous leaders, or whether or not we have leaders that should be ashamed of themselves throughout history, throughout eternity they'll be ashamed.

And you know what? If they do the wrong thing, we should never, ever forget that they did. Never forget. We should never ever forget.

In his CRB essay, Kesler concedes that Donald Trump is a man who makes "constant, characteristic, and exaggerated appeals" to brute force, but he also claims that, in this passage, the "ultimate appeal is not so much to might *but to a form of right, based not merely in history but in 'eternity'*" (emphasis added). So, in Kesler's curious interpretation, Trump shares the very same beautiful ideals that the Claremont Institute, with its unbreachable faith in the Founding, professes to uphold. Trump is here to stand up for the eternal moral order of things, and against the eternal conservative bogeymen of Hegelian historicism, and relativism, and materialism.

Continuing with this highly contrived reading, Kesler makes another astonish-

ing claim: “To know you have acted shamefully is the worst penalty, he [Donald Trump] advises, or ought to be, which is where public opinion—and the possibility of later electoral defeat—comes to bear as an external sanction against the otherwise shameless.” Kesler’s Trump apparently believes, alongside Plato’s Socrates, that virtue is its own reward and shame its own awful penalty. Kesler’s Trump teaches that public sanctions like election losses have an important role to play in punishing the shameless. In this context—and admittedly it can be tricky to keep track—the shameless ones Trump purportedly has in mind are the leaders in Congress (and Vice President Pence) who dare to ignore the protesters, and so refuse to stand up for Trump. According to Kesler’s reading of the speech, this passage is an expression of Trump’s trust in the immutable laws of nature, as well as an expression of his belief that Mike Pence must be held accountable at the voting booth. But even if that doesn’t work, Kesler assures us, “The penalty he [Trump] points to is eventual public *and private* obloquy.” Kesler’s Trump is an extraordinarily earnest proponent of both electoral accountability and the natural law power of shame.

One might well wonder why Kesler thinks that Trump thinks that his audience should trust in electoral accountability for Pence given Trump’s otherwise total lack of faith in the electoral system. Or why Trump, as Kesler understands him, believes that Mike Pence is the shameless one. But that would be to push for coherence, accountability, and reason where there simply is none to be found.

**I**n the end, and to his credit, Charles Kesler does not come out and endorse a public future for Donald Trump. Kesler’s heart clearly isn’t in it, and since he’s trying to have it every way at once, the piece winds up sounding more like a lukewarm swansong than a full-throated rallying cry. But the conclusion of Kesler’s essay also contains some notes of real admiration for the former president:

It may be that the pleasures of being a billionaire are more entrancing than Trump remembers, and he might decide just to enjoy life in Florida. Or his health might dictate it. But the appetite for high office, once indulged, is not easily renounced. Plus the awful, ignominious way his term ended will add the spur of honor (and vengeance) to his pursuit of approval. He wants to belong especially to any club that won’t have him as a member. Failing that, he will build his own bigger and better club, as he did with Mar-a-Lago.

Again, this sort of thing is difficult to describe, since it offers such an odd mix of high and low. There are the crass appeals to Trump’s wealth. There’s the preening and pomp (“the appetite for high office, once indulged, is not easily renounced”). There’s the notion that Trump might be motivated by a “spur of honor,” placed next to (approving?) references to the man’s vain insecurity and lust for vengeance. And what could it mean in this context for Trump to go “build his own bigger and better club”?

Kesler concludes on a note of pan-Republican unity:

Nonetheless, one element of his [Trump's] political manner needs to cross over from him personally to the movement he has led, and that is the courage he shows in confronting political correctness, cancel culture, and the scorn of progressive censors. His successors cannot afford to lose his wonderful effrontery in opposing, for example, the continuing ideological purges of American history and heroes.

The one thing that, according to Kesler, everyone on the right should agree about is that Trump was really courageous when it came to owning the libs.

## II. Michael Anton and Friends: Flight 93 Forever

Kesler's post-January 6 essay provides a useful demonstration of how, at the Claremont Institute, the notion of evidence has been rendered meaningless, even while the institute's scholars cling tightly to strict abstract ideas about statesmanship and natural law. It's a place where grab-'em-by-the-pussy Trump, one of the most shameless and divisive figures in recent American history—a man who shows nothing but contempt for constitutional forms—is lauded as a courageous, manly hero and righteous defender of democratic freedoms. And it's a place where supposedly high-minded intellectuals grovel shamelessly for public influence.

But it is impossible to grasp the full *pathos* of Kesler's discussion of January 6 absent some sense of just how enmeshed the Claremont Institute became with Trumpism, and of just how incontrovertibly committed the Claremont crowd was to Trump's Big Lie about the election. For some Claremont scholars, there was simply no world in which a Democratic win could be legitimate, no world in which the Democrats could win without committing a coup—so they became complicit in Trump's efforts to sabotage the electoral system. To understand this, we have to turn to Michael Anton's pre- and post-election work for Claremont's web publication, the *American Mind*, and the institute leadership's amplification of this work.

Because so much of what we see in the *American Mind*'s election-season pieces is slippery and convoluted, it can be difficult to explain what happened there. But let me try to lay it out clearly. We can break the Claremont Institute's 2020 election writings into two phases: the good-faith planning phase and the bad-faith hyping phase.

During the good-faith pre-election planning phase, which took place over the course of the summer and early fall of 2020, Claremont published several pieces that anticipated possible electoral challenges, including a potential "Biden

Coup.” Of course, the Claremont crowd was not alone in worrying about election integrity, or coups, and the authors of these early pieces used others’ efforts in this vein—like the bipartisan Transition Integrity Project—as the launching point for their own speculative work. A relatively temperate August 2020 piece by Andrew Busch, a government professor at Claremont McKenna College, was based on such a prepare-for-the-worst premise.

A few weeks later, the site published a piece by Anton called “The Coming Coup?” with the subheadline “Democrats are laying the groundwork for revolution right in front of our eyes.” There is at the outset of the article a presumption that the actual election results would mean something. But by the second half of the essay, Anton evinces paranoia that the early voting and mail-in voting measures enacted by state governments to cope with the global pandemic would be used by Democrats to steal the election. (Never mind that those measures were enacted by both Democratic- and Republican-controlled state governments.) A devotee of Machiavelli, Anton games out what kind of scheme the Democratic connivers are really up to (“it *must not look like a conspiracy*,” he drippingly observes).

The week after Anton’s piece ran, the editors at the *American Mind* dropped the remaining pretense of good faith. On September 12, in an editorial titled “Stop the Coup,” they went ahead and declared the Biden coup a reality. “It’s time to unmask the revolution,” they announced, and all through the article, they treated the Biden coup as a *fait accompli*. In other words, the Claremont Institute’s good-faith pre-emptive planning phase was over before it got started, and the bad-faith hyping phase has gone on ever since. (It is worth noting that in October 2020, Claremont partnered with the Texas Public Policy Foundation to create something called the “79 Days Report.” A direct response to the Transition Integrity Project, this report reads as a reasonably good-faith effort to game out 2020 election scenarios—but it is in flagrant contradiction with the pieces published contemporaneously by the *American Mind*, which presumed bad faith on the part of Democrats.)

With election day (November 3) and the possibility that Trump would be declared the loser, the supposition that the election result would and should matter fell away completely. The ground rules shifted. If the actual election results were not going to show Trump triumphant, then something else would have to kick in. On November 4—while several states were still counting votes, and three days before the press informally called the election for Joe Biden—the *American Mind* published a new Anton piece, entitled “Game on for the Coup.” Anton admits in this article that he isn’t sure what is really going on—“The thing could (but will never) be proved”—but he’s confident enough to lay out a game plan that he calls “Stop the Steal,” reusing a name that Roger Stone gave to his shady pro-Trump group in 2016.

Against the Biden coup, Anton, borrowing from an article at Revolver.News (a new right-wing info site), recommends that Trumpists organize court challenges, rallies, disputes about electors, and a massive grassroots campaign in support



of the president. By this point, Anton found the idea of a legitimate Biden victory implausible, partly because no one could possibly believe Biden could win:

Even if the steal [i.e., Biden's victory] can be made to stick, half the country won't accept it. That is, they'll accept the reality that power is now in the hands of a party that took it by fraud. But they won't believe that the election was fair or the outcome real. They will believe, or be confirmed in a belief that's been brewing for a long time, that the system is rigged, the process is fake, the ruling class are liars, the government is illegitimate, and that they themselves are subjects and not citizens—anything but a free people with a say over its own destiny.

Let anyone wonder whether Anton's views on the election were merely his own or reflected Claremont's institutional position, one day later, on November 5, key leaders at the institute—including Ryan P. Williams, the institute's president; Arthur Milikh, the executive director of the institute's new Center for the American Way of Life; Matthew J. Peterson, the institute's vice president of education and founding editor of the *American Mind*; and James Poulos, a conservative essayist and the executive editor of the *American Mind*—published an editorial called “The Fight is Now.” It reads as a plan and manifesto for the delegitimization campaign that we saw unfold on the American right through to January 6, and which is still ongoing. It is replete with distortions and lies. (In one instance, the editorial was silently changed when a particularly inflammatory headline lifted from a right-wing website—claiming that seven wards in Milwaukee reported “more 2020 presidential votes than registered voters”—proved false. This was a stealth edit: The authors did not post a comment acknowledging their mistake or admitting that the piece had been altered to disappear an error of fact.)

Except for one sentence at the very beginning, the editorial takes as plain fact a steal/coup on the part of Biden—e.g., “Republicans must aggressively investigate and prosecute any and all wrongdoing in *the attempt to steal this election*”; and “the Republican base also understands both the stakes and *the attempt to steal the election that is now well underway*” (emphases added).

The actual plan presented in “The Fight is Now” was mostly a rehash of Anton's piece from the day before. The first thing to do is “Bring Out the Lawyers.” Williams, Milikh, Peterson, and Poulos recommend that the GOP send “swarms of lawyers” to “demand explanation and investigation of every vote in every disputed state NOW” since the “Democratic city machines” are “churning out votes for Biden.” From there, the authors reveal a four-part plan to “Bring Out the People.” The final part of that plan—cringeworthy in its chest-thumping bluster and alarming in its militancy—is worth quoting in full:

Finally, all weak sisters on the right must be called out. In military doctrine, psychological operations only work on a populace that is already experienc-

ing a defeat. They backfire when conducted against resilient and confident foes. The media and the left right now are trying to defeat and demoralize half the country under the guise of “democracy” and disingenuous cries of “just count the votes!” After the last six months, the last thirty years, the last damned century—conservatives and Republicans who lack steely resolve need to be called out and cast aside for those who will fight!

There is no time to lose. We have already detailed what the Democrats want to happen next. The playbook is already written, but it is not yet fully executed. It can be stopped if Republicans act together—now—to stop it.

To state the obvious: Everything these men are arguing for is completely upside down and backwards. It flies in the face of the actual election results, which in fact went the other way. The Claremont “Biden coup” narrative, as with “stop the steal,” was rank sophistry and bullshit. Trump was the one trying to overturn a legitimate election, not Biden. He spent months laying the groundwork for a challenge to the legitimacy of the election if he lost, repeatedly predicting that the election would be “rigged.” All the way through to January 6, he was engaged in an effort to overturn valid election results via false claims about election fraud. Had he succeeded, he would have invalidated the legitimate votes of over 81 million Americans, thereby profoundly damaging the democratic foundations of the American Republic. It almost certainly would have brought mass-scale instability and violence.

And the Claremont Institute was there the whole time, playing along and stoking the lies.

**I**n the aftermath of January 6, Michael Anton has continued to defend his work hyping the election fraud narrative, albeit in an incredibly awkward and self-denying way. Writing in the *Claremont Review* alongside the Kesler piece discussed above, Anton refuses to take responsibility for the fact that he personally served as a veritable engine for “stop the steal” hysteria, much as he served to legitimate Trumpism in 2016 with his “Flight 93 Election” essay. One very peculiar thing about Anton’s latest gambit is the extent to which his claims about voter fraud rely on alleged “statistical anomalies” and “historical anomalies”—the notion being that the 2020 electoral results were somehow unusual. This new shtick seems a bit at odds with the old one: According to Flight 93 standards, Trump represented something unprecedented, world-historical, and super-risky; but apparently things didn’t get strange enough by 2020 to account for anything weird.

Yet in another way, there is real continuity here. In an essay from February, Jonathan Chait exposes some of Anton’s other lies and evasions, but as he also observes, Anton is determined simply to advance “the timetable for the apocalyptic confrontation.”

Once you begin understanding our national politics as a matter of emergencies, corruption, and lies reparable only by figures of exceptional heroism, there is no returning to a politics of the everyday, of democratic choice and representation, and of disagreement, contestation, and compromise. There is no ramp off from Flight 93 politics, no easy weaning from the dystopian hype.

### III. Glenn Ellmers: Full-on Fanatic

For a sense of what arguments like Anton's and Kesler's betoken for the future of Claremont and American conservatism more generally, let's turn to Glenn Ellmers's March 24 *American Mind* piece, "'Conservatism' is no Longer Enough." A Claremont Institute senior fellow and a visiting research scholar at Hillsdale College, Ellmers writes on the nature of the conservative movement today and makes a case that the ideas of "Claremont conservatives" and "MAGA voters" are in harmony, if not unison. His essay offers a crystallization of the Claremont Institute's relentless divisiveness and delusional self-regard.

Ellmers's essay—topped by a stock-art photo of a boxer wrapping his hands for a fight—begins by characterizing his enemy, which, it turns out, consists of the majority of the country: "Most people living in the United States today—certainly more than half—are not Americans in any meaningful sense of the term." The people he has in mind are the ones who voted for Joe Biden ("the senile figurehead of a party that stands for mob violence, ruthless censorship, and racial grievances, not to mention bureaucratic despotism"). The real and "authentic" Americans are, "by and large," the 74 million people who voted for Trump—"the vast numbers of heartland voters who still call themselves Americans." For Ellmers, there is only "*the one, authentic America*"; the rest of the people in this country "do not believe in, live by, or even like the principles, traditions, and ideals that until recently defined America as a nation and as a people." He goes on: "It is not obvious what we should call these citizen-aliens, these non-American Americans; but they are something else."

He devotes large sections of the essay to frenzied fear-mongering about the state of American politics. According to Ellmers:

- "practically speaking, there is almost nothing left to conserve";
- "our norms are now hopelessly corrupt and need to be destroyed";
- "our body politic is dying";
- "in almost every case, the political practices, institutions, and even rhetoric governing the United States have become hostile to *both* liberty and virtue";

- the progressives are “narcotizing the American people and turning us into a nation of slaves”;
- “if the defenders of America continue to squabble among themselves, the victory of progressive tyranny will be assured. See you in the gulag”;
- “America, as an identity or political movement, might need to carry on without the United States.”

Whenever Ellmers turns to ideas that are even slightly more normal, it’s a little bit jarring. We learn at one point that an effective political movement “needs intellectual leadership to organize and explain the movement’s purposes and goals,” and the guiding purpose of Ellmers’s essay, it turns out, is to highlight the noble role that the Claremont Institute ought to play—and that only Claremont can play—in forging the conservative movement’s future. It’s a bit like Trump’s “I Alone” speech from the 2016 Republican National Convention.

Only the Claremont Institute, with its deep understanding of American Founding principles, sees (“with special clarity”) that the old legacy conservatism is “a dead end.”

Only Claremont understands that, to re-establish America’s ancient principles in practice, America needs a “sort of counter-revolution.”

Only Claremont “transcends the conservative divisions by representing the true, non-partisan understanding of America.”

Only Claremont knows that “political philosophy actually matters for political life.”

But let’s set aside the passage’s weirdly inflated regard for Claremont and consider two additional aspects of Ellmers’s essay. First, he writes in abstract generalizations, never acknowledging anything untoward in the Founding, almost never offering specifics about the left he detests, and never letting historical or moral complexity enter his account. This allows him to heighten the distinction he wishes to draw between, on one hand, the achievement of the Founding and how it was “long and originally understood,” and on the other, the terrible things that the progressive left has wreaked.

And so you have the absurdity of an essay that praises the Founding without even paying lip service to the horror of American slavery—indeed that only mentions slavery in a passage that accuses progressives of wanting to turn America into “a nation of slaves.” You have the absurdity of an essay that repeatedly praises the “nonpartisan” nature of the Constitution without acknowledging that many of the same individuals who framed that Constitution quickly thereafter found it necessary to form the first political parties. You have the absurdity of an essay that praises Donald Trump as a statesman who “understands” the metaphorical “disease afflicting the nation” being published during an actual pandemic in which Trump’s policies worsened the death toll.

Second, Ellmers’s essay is a bold-faced call to anti-republican, anti-demo-

cratic, factional arms and action. More than any kind of legitimate appeal to republican or democratic norms of persuasion, it signals an acknowledgment of defeat. As John Ganz writes in a thoughtful commentary on the essay, “its themes of pervading national corruption and decadence, and the need for a counter-revolution and a national rebirth put this text firmly in the radical reactionary or fascist ballpark.”

In this regard, consider the archetypal features of fascism that Sarah Churchwell summarized in an essay last summer, “American Fascism: It Has Happened Here”:

Nostalgia for a purer, mythic, often rural past; cults of tradition and cultural regeneration; paramilitary groups; the delegitimizing of political opponents and demonization of critics; the universalizing of some groups as authentically national, while dehumanizing all other groups; hostility to intellectualism and attacks on a free press; anti-modernism; fetishized patriarchal masculinity; and a distressed sense of victimhood and collective grievance. Fascist mythologies often incorporate a notion of cleansing, an exclusionary defense against racial or cultural contamination, and related eugenicist preferences for certain “bloodlines” over others. Fascism weaponizes identity, validating the *Herrenvolk* and invalidating all the other folk.

There is nothing definitive about lists like these, and Churchwell’s includes some things that are, to varying degrees, present in every society. But Ellmers’s essay reads like a bingo card for the worst of it.

The main through-line in the Claremont Institute’s recent reactionary work is hatred for Democrats and the ruling “overlords” of modernity. But in the end, men such as Kesler and Anton and Ellmers, like all sophists and fakes, also betray loathing and contempt for their own audience, and for themselves.

Oh, and then there’s the racism.

## IV. The Lower Circles

At one point in his essay, Ellmers offers advice to his readers:

If you are a zombie or a human rodent who wants a shadow-life of timid conformity, then put away this essay and go memorize the poetry of Amanda Gorman.

Gorman is the young black poet who spoke movingly at President Joe Biden’s inauguration. Ellmers’s line here is vicious on its face, and John Ganz rightly describes it as a hint of “the kind of dehumanizing rhetoric that fascist propagandists employ.” But it also ought to be read in the context of Claremont and racism.



This is not the place to make a wide-ranging, thoroughgoing argument about the ways in which the institute's simplistic, jingoistic understanding of the American Founding dovetails—at least in practice—with American white supremacy.\* For now, my main aim is to call attention to some of the most disturbing things that have been going on at the Claremont Institute under the group's current leadership. The following remarks do not reflect on all of the institute's hundreds of fellows and dozens of scholars and board members, past and present. But they suggest a disturbing trend, reflect badly on the institute's current leadership, and presumably should give funders and friends of the institute pause.

First off, the Claremont Institute has knowingly provided cover to, and made common cause with, an alleged white supremacist named Darren J. Beattie. Beattie has a Ph.D. in political philosophy from Duke University. He was a speech-writer in the Trump White House but was fired in August 2018 for having spoken at a conference in 2016 alongside white supremacists. This caused a stir at the Claremont Institute, since, according to reporting at the time, Beattie appealed to the organization's listserv for help (Beattie had spent a few weeks at one of Claremont's summer fellowship programs; the listserv was eventually shut down by Ryan Williams, Claremont's president, when another controversial Claremont fellowship alumnus, Charles Johnson, weighed in with offensive remarks). The *American Mind* nevertheless published an article by Beattie in January 2019. More recently, Beattie founded the website *Revolver.News*, which, as we have seen, influenced Anton. Launched in May 2020, *Revolver.News* appears to have been key in spreading conspiratorial child-abuse allegations against Hunter Biden. In

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\* Here is how I would begin to make the argument about the interplay of Claremont-style reverence for the past and white supremacy: It is one thing to admire the intellectual acumen of the Founders, to appreciate the political achievements of America's Founding era, and to revere the achievements and writings of Abraham Lincoln. Scholars at Claremont often go further, though, indulging in the kind of full-throated hagiography and selective history that can only make sense through a white-supremacist lens. Learning about the experiences of black people and Native Americans on these shores, after all, inevitably puts a damper on reverential enthusiasms about the past; reading about the Hemings family alters one's perception of Thomas Jefferson. Claremont fears this sort of dampening, seeing it as a threat to American patriotism and self-confidence, as well as an injustice to the memory of the Founders. What they miss is that what they perceive as a threat to America is really only a threat to white-supremacist America; when it comes to the multiracial American republic that the Declaration arguably anticipates, a more inclusive and variegated historical lens is positively restorative. By refusing a more complex approach to American historical education—the kind that, in addition to the Founding Fathers, wants to hear from Annette Gordon-Reed or Nikole Hannah-Jones—the Claremont scholars refuse the civic wholeness and equality of their non-white compatriots. In so doing, they give short shrift to the white American public, too.

June, Beattie took credit on behalf of Revolver.News for “breaking” a story about the Deep State’s involvement in January 6.

If there were any question before about Darren Beattie’s purported racism, there isn’t anymore, because on January 6, during the insurrection at the Capitol, Beattie was busy sending out vile, racist tweets. As of the publication of this article, they are still up. You can see the worst of them—a series of tweets saying various African Americans must “learn their place” and “take a knee to MAGA”—here, and here, and here, and here, as well as in the image below. Even so, on January 7, Ryan Williams, the current president of the Claremont Institute, continued to promote Beattie on Twitter. Other Twitter users brought Beattie’s January 6 tweets to Williams’s attention, but Williams did not explain, retract, or qualify his promotion of Beattie, or apparently distance himself from Beattie in any way; only sometime later did Williams scrub his Twitter account.



**Patrick T. Brown** @PTBwrites

Replying to @RpwWilliams

Ryan, did the conversation asking Beattie if he still stands by the sentiments he tweeted during the mob at the Capital? If not, why are you promoting him?

**Sophie Ellman-Golan** @EgSophie · Jan 7

White House appointee & former @RepMattGaetz staffer Darren Beattie is a white supremacist. While Nazis were storming the Capitol, Darren was telling Black people to “take a knee to MAGA” and “learn their proper place in society.”

[Show this thread](#)

<p><b>Darren J. Beattie</b> @DarrenJBeattie</p> <p>Tim Scott needs to learn his place and take a KNEE to MAGA</p> <p>2:25 PM · 1/6/21 · <a href="#">Twitter Web App</a></p>	<p><b>Darren J. Beattie</b> @DarrenJBeattie</p> <p>BLM must take a knee to MAGA They must learn their place</p> <p>3:04 PM · 1/6/21 · <a href="#">Twitter Web App</a></p>
<p><b>Darren J. Beattie</b> @DarrenJBeattie</p> <p>Ibram Kendi needs to learn his place and take a knee to MAGA Learn his proper role in our society</p>	<p><b>Darren J. Beattie</b> @DarrenJBeattie</p> <p>Kay Cole James of Heritage Foundation needs to learn her natural place and take a KNEE to MAGA</p>

10:49 AM · Jan 8, 2021 · [Twitter Web App](#)

There are other signs of a racism problem at the Claremont Institute. On November 15, 2020, the *American Mind* published a secondhand “report from the ground” about the Million MAGA March—a November 14 event organized in Washington, D.C. by Trump supporters to protest the election results. The piece is by Christopher Flannery—one of the founders of the Claremont Institute,

as well as an institute senior fellow, podcaster, and board member—and is based on his wife’s experience as an attendee. The report contains apologetics for the Proud Boys and concludes with an account of how, on Flannery’s wife’s bus ride home, “viewers watched over livestream on cell phones as BLM-Antifa evil took over Washington, D.C., preying on, among others, kids, families, the disabled, and the elderly.” These sorts of things don’t appear on the websites of reputable think tanks.

Or consider John Eastman’s August 2020 speculation, published in the pages of *Newsweek*, that Kamala Harris was ineligible to be vice president, echoing the racist “birtherist” lies long used to attack President Obama. (The *Newsweek* editors responsible, including Claremont fellowship alumnus Josh Hammer, at first offered a defense of their decision to run Eastman’s piece, then later added an awkward apologetic note to it.)

Or consider the stream of statements that Claremont’s leaders released last summer, in which they proclaimed with simplistic confidence that “America is Not Racist” and it’s time for Republicans to “Stand Up” against Black Lives Matter. According to Ryan Williams and Thomas D. Klingenstein, the chairman of Claremont’s board of directors and apparently its biggest funder, Black Lives Matter is “totalitarian”—a preposterous claim—and seeks to “destroy the American way of life.” (As I wrote at the time, “the heartbeat of [Claremont’s] position is denial. . . . They dodge history and deny evidence, and refuse political agency to ordinary actors.”)

In addition to Claremont’s obsession with Black Lives Matter, it is worth noting its handling of Ibram X. Kendi’s writings on “antiracism” and of Nikole Hannah-Jones and the 1619 Project, and now of so-called “Critical Race Theory.” It is, of course, entirely within anyone’s right to disagree strongly with these individuals and ideas, as well as with any of the programs that they have inspired (fair-minded people from across the political spectrum do it all the time). But the Claremont approach is distinctive for its consistent reduction of so-called “woke” issues to their most caricatured, extreme, Manichean form; it is distinctive for its insistence that the most radical version of these movements has now become hardened orthodoxy among all Democrats and most anyone in mainstream culture; and it is distinctive for its hand-waving refusal to acknowledge that concerns about American racism have even the slightest grounding in reality, let alone in genuine patriotism. Forget that Nikole Hannah-Jones’s feature essay tells the story of her grappling with—and coming to identify deeply with—her veteran father’s staunch commitment to core American principles and creeds as they are set out in the Declaration. For Claremont, all of it—from Black Lives Matter, to the George Floyd protests, to the 1619 Project—all of it is the result of bad-faith “elite” intellectualism; none of it has to do with serious history or actual Americans’ experiences on the ground.

Lastly, consider the role that the institute played in Donald Trump’s 1776 Commission Report, which was created largely as a response to the 1619 Project.

In his essay, Ellmers suggests that Claremont induced the 1619 Project: “A good argument can be made that were it not for Jaffa’s 60 years of influential scholarship . . . the *New York Times* and its allies would not have found it necessary to launch the 1619 Project.” That claim is unconvincing. But the 1776 Report does bear Claremont’s intellectual fingerprints and has been republished and vigorously promoted by the institute. Read the report (or Charles Kesler’s new book) and you’ll get a pretty good sense of how Claremont-style thinking dodges simple racial realities and truths. The 1776 Report minimizes the role that chattel slavery played in America’s past. The section on slavery is a historicist apologia for the Founders, the logical core of which is *everyone was doing it*. There is no discussion of how the institution of slavery grew in the 1800s, such that four million black people were enslaved by the time of the Civil War (up from perhaps 700,000 at the time of the Founding). The report glides through the failures of Reconstruction and a century of Jim Crow in just three perfunctory sentences, and it diminishes the civil rights movement (which, according to the report’s authors, “was almost immediately turned to programs that ran counter to the lofty ideals of the founders”). The report is written under the assumption that racism in America, to the extent that it was ever a problem, was solved circa 1965 and is now a part of the past.

But above all else, the 1776 Report—like nearly all things Claremont—calls for total and unflinching allegiance to America’s founding principles, as its authors conceive of them. The “truth about America” is straightforward, the editors of the *American Mind* opined last October in anticipation of the commission, and that truth is simply amazing:

We at the Claremont Institute are dedicated to proving, *emphatically and without qualification*, that a full endorsement of our country’s principles is not only a patriotic act but, intellectually and morally, an *unimpeachable* one. That entails *insisting* that the history of our country is one of dedicated human striving toward the highest ideals, and the most prudent political enactment of those ideals, possible on this earth. [Emphases added.]

It seems the Claremont Institute believes that America is simply, and in reality, the very best possible place on this earth. For them, America’s founding principles, in combination with a slippery notion of political prudence, offer total immunity and protection against any suggestion of—let alone accountability for—historical or present-day wrongdoing. In this understanding, America’s principles and ideals, rather than serving as very high standards toward which a country might strive, or against which we might judge our institutions and culture, instead serve to provide absolute cover for full-throttle partisan politics and injustice. “Prudence” and “statesmanship” thus become rhetorical tools to selectively explain or excuse any failure to meet a given moral standard. It is a *heads I win, tails you lose* arrangement, allowing Claremont to dodge any serious



engagement with unpleasantness, error, or injustice from historical or contemporary figures they like, while blasting those figures they dislike—liberals, progressives, today's woke left—as amoral monsters or imprudent idealists.

Claremont is determined to carry its vision of America into the future. The institute's new Center for the American Way of Life, which has opened an office just one block from the Capitol, takes as its purpose combating American multiculturalism. Claremont considers multiculturalism an "existential threat," as Klingenstein puts it, comparing it to slavery in the 1850s. "Multiculturalism's design," writes Williams in the institute's biennial report, "is to divide and conquer the American people." Since America is incompatible with multiculturalism, Claremont sees itself as locked in a "regime-level contest." "Make no mistake," writes Williams, "it is a war."

As the new center's executive director Arthur Milikh puts it, this regime-level struggle

will preserve or destroy the purpose that has defined [America]. On one side stands the American way of life, characterized by republican self-government and the habits of mind and character necessary to sustain it. On the other side stands identity politics, which demands the perpetual punishment and humiliation of so-called oppressor groups combined with the unquestioned rule of the so-called marginalized. These two regimes are in conflict and cannot coexist.

A great deal could be unpacked here. Historians could certainly have a field day with that narrow description of "the American way of life." And the description of identity politics is both perverse and, in its mockery—"the *so-called* marginalized"—ugly and sarcastic. But how should we understand the broader argument of an existential clash over multiculturalism? And what are we to make of the insistent martial language ("make no mistake, it is a war")?

Those in the institute's upper echelons walk a thin line of deniability. Williams denies that Claremont's attacks on multiculturalism (and support for an American monoculture) have anything to do with race. But even granting the absurd implicit proposition—that competing cultural and religious perspectives are not foundational to America, and to the very meaning of *E pluribus unum*—is it right to think that the American public will be as mindful as he claims to be? In a country whose cultural divides often map onto complex racialized history, is it reasonable to believe that a "war" on multiculturalism will not devolve into ethnic conflict?

On the other hand, last fall, Claremont's *American Mind* published pseudonymous fantasy-fiction pieces (and other special features) about the threats posed by "Urban America" and the need for a secession of "the United American counties." Here the editors hedge, saying they have a "duty" to "put into print

the vital discussions that others will not touch.” So perhaps they do perceive the racial overtones and dangers inherent in their arguments after all.

## V. What Fresh Hell

One pattern is by now clear: For Claremont, abstract ideals and arguments take precedence over reality and facts on the ground. The glories of the Founding ideals eclipse the historical facts of racist brutality and bondage, excuse the injustices and inequalities of today, and even justify extraordinary political extremism. Because Claremont favors sweeping theoretical discussions to actual policy debates, it forgoes opportunities for genuine politics and compromise, or even for their prerequisite: clearly beholding others who disagree.

The Claremont Institute is chockfull of people who are too delicate to contend honestly with the legacy of slavery, even while they keep ties to overt racists. It puts America’s Founding ideals in the service of debased political actors and deploys them as ideological cant. The abstractions of the Founding are worshiped as the highest good, but in such a rigid and stultifying way that change and history and progress are inevitably slandered as decline. And alongside unquestioning reverence for the principles of the Founding, we find explosive and irrational distrust in the actual institutions of government. Claremont has become at once insular and incoherent—untethered from broader American reality and deeply enmeshed in practices that would be anathema to those they profess most to admire. They do not have serious views about where the country as a whole should be headed, and yet they are desperate to take us there.

That detachment from practical politics raises a vexing question for anyone trying to judge the significance of what has been going on at Claremont: Why does it matter? What have been, or might yet be, the real-world effects of the institute’s recent work?

After all, Claremont did not have with the Trump administration the kind of close relationship that policy-focused, Washington-based think tanks have often had with other presidential administrations. In 2017, when the incoming Trump administration—chaotic, confused, and wary of many existing conservative institutions—needed help staffing the government, it primarily turned to the Heritage Foundation. The Claremont Institute, on the other side of the country and lacking a policy focus, seems not to have entered into the Trump team’s calculations. A few alumni of the institute’s fellowship programs were hired for junior positions around the administration, and of course the author of Claremont’s “Flight 93” article, Michael Anton, was hired to work on communications for the National Security Council. But there was no major influx of Claremont scholars into the government under Trump.

Nor would it be correct to say that Claremont’s ideas fundamentally shaped Donald Trump’s presidency. Rather, it was the brute fact of Trump’s candidacy

and presidency that determined the direction of the institute. The Claremont crowd sought, starting with the 2016 campaign, to provide intellectual justification for Trump's pronouncements and policies. This was largely an exercise in pretending that Trump's sow's ears really had been silk purses all along.

With Trump, an opportunity beckoned, and Claremont jumped. To understand why it matters that they did, consider how the institute's public reputation has shifted in the last five years. Before Trump, the institute was known for two things: the *Claremont Review of Books*, its staid quarterly that published essays and reviews about political philosophy as well as cultural and literary analysis, usually by conservative academics; and the fellowship programs that spread the gospel of Jaffa.

Today, the Claremont Institute is better known for three things. First, there is the Trumpism of its people and publications, from the "Flight 93" essay onward. Second, there is the *American Mind*, which is constantly pumping out combative, juvenile, and grotesque articles and podcasts and Substack content that attract far more attention than the slower, more academic output of the *CRB*. And third, there is what we might call the "Claremont Expanded Universe"—the shifting web of publications and projects that are not formally owned and operated by Claremont but are perceived as connected. Chief among these is *American Greatness*, a publication that churns out Trumpist propaganda alongside overt white supremacy. It extensively overlaps with Claremont: Everyone on its masthead has a Claremont connection, and Claremont's most prominent scholars—including Angelo Codevilla, William Voegeli, Allen Guelzo, and of course Michael Anton, Glenn Ellmers, and John Eastman—have all written for it.

**L**ike think tanks from time immemorial, Claremont hoped that it could influence the president and his administration. But the lines of influence mostly pointed in the other direction: Claremont's encounter with Trumpism left Donald Trump unchanged—he did not become enamored of America's highest ideals—while the Claremont Institute was remade in his image. Not just nativist and racist. Not just illiberal and prone to conspiracy theories. But even post-truth. And now, explicitly anti-democracy.

And I worry that they are just getting started. Claremont is swiftly becoming a propaganda juggernaut. It is welcoming divisive, anti-democratic figures. Through its publications and other programs, it is in a position to warp the intellectual formation of young writers, lawyers, and academics who will presumably play an important part in the future of the American right. And the institute, having been thus transformed by its years-long embrace of Trump, now yearns for a radical remaking of America.

I wonder: Do the respected scholars and thinkers who continue to write for the *Claremont Review of Books* agree with the new direction of the institute? Do they think that contributing only to the higher-end publication insulates them from being associated with the grossest parts of the overall Claremont project? Their continued involvement suggests that Claremont can continue to operate with

reputational impunity. One wonders when, if ever, they might be willing to draw a line.

Similarly, do all of Claremont's scholars and fellows, their hundreds of fellowship alumni, including former faculty fellows, feel comfortable having their names used in fundraising efforts on behalf of the institute's latest undertakings? Or will they voice an objection?

And are the foundations whose grants fund Claremont, including a number of small family foundations, aware of what the institute has become?

I am not someone who recoils instinctively from invocations of the Founding Fathers. I think the Declaration of Independence is an inspiring document and I even hold its most important truths to be self-evident. When I visit the Lincoln Memorial, I read the inscriptions every time, and every time I feel a hush of awe—at the austere Gettysburg Address on the south wall, and the Second Inaugural, full of strength and grace, on the north. I'm the earnest sort of person who believes that every American would benefit from better historical and civic education and greater familiarity with these documents and these places. And though these days my sympathies lie with the American left, I don't think any political or intellectual tradition has a lock on the truth, nor any group of partisans on civic virtue. Truth may be enduring, but politics are highly changeable, and that is true whether the folks at Claremont like it or not.

In my mind, good political thinking can do work in the world to make power less arbitrary and its exercise more humane. Indeed, part of what distresses me about Claremont's transformation is that the organization takes things that I hold dear and lies about them, or uses them as cover for its grasping, and increasingly fanatical, form of politics.

Others have warned—going as far back as 1985—that Claremont's revisionist and idealizing brand of patriotism comes at a serious cost, because it refuses an honest encounter with the past. What begins as idealizing myth sours into a zealous denialism that eventually becomes feverish and all-consuming.

Today, such a thread seems to be pulling hard on the Claremont psyche, from Charles Kesler on down through the organization's underworld. And the harder they try to assert their myth, the more their efforts chafe against reality. Claremont cannot erase the complexities, tensions, and brutal inadequacies of America's past, and they cannot erase the basic decency of their political opponents. But they can stir up a lot of hate, and they are already in pretty deep. I worry that soon the only place they will have left to go is nihilistic fanaticism—that strange, ancient mix of thwarted idealism and lashing resentment that can lead to desperate, lying violence.

The Claremont Institute says that its mission is “to restore the principles of the American Founding to their rightful, preeminent authority in our national life,” but all it has done lately is divide and despoil the public spirit.

At any point along the way, any one of these people could stop and say “no more.”