

THE STAKES: AMERICA AT THE POINT OF NO RETURN

(MICHAEL ANTON)

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Michael Anton's latest, half analysis and half prophecy, is simultaneously terrifying and clarifying. As I have said before, I align very closely with Anton in both core politics and attitude toward politics, so naturally I am enthusiastic about a new Anton book. But in this very fluid time, he writes as nobody else seems able, making manifest where we are and where we are going. It proves his talent that in the mere two months since Anton wrote his Preface, more than one of his predictions has come true. Maybe he sold his soul in exchange for the gift of prescience, or stole a *palantir*. Whatever the reasons behind its no-holds-barred insights, this is an excellent book to which we all must pay close attention, to navigate the coming chaos and come out whole on the other side.

Anton is, on the surface at least, a Straussian—a believer that the American political system reached, perhaps not perfection, but as close to perfection as is likely possible in any human society, in some combination of 1787 and 1865. I do not believe he is a fully sincere Straussian, in that I suspect he does not actually think we can return to those halcyon days. Rather, he has effectively turned Augustan—interested in how a decent, even flourishing, society can be achieved through the clear-eyed use of power, not necessarily in the form of a republic, much less a democracy. In fact, in *The Stakes*, he explicitly examines the possibility of both left and right Augustanism, the rise of “Blue Caesar” or “Red Caesar,” to which possibility we will return below. True, that's only part of this book, which first shows our inevitable awful future if we stay on our current path, and then discusses several possible alternatives, including at least one optimistic one. But I think it's telling that someone of Anton's stature openly and without apology talks about pessimistic futures.

Anton became famous as the result of a 2016 essay, “The Flight 93 Election,” in which he pointed out the existential nature of the 2016 Presidential election. He was much criticized by the catamite Right (and by the Left), but every word he wrote has been proven exactly correct, including those he wrote in his follow-up, *After the Flight 93 Election*. As

he predicted in 2019, the 2020 election is even more existential. I did not think we would end up here—in early 2017 I predicted an American renewal. Ah well, I was wrong. Anton's basic point, in a book filled with important points (and sparkling, pull-you-along writing), is that every election will necessarily be more existential, until either the Left wins all power, succeeding in its goal of denying the legitimacy of anything other than one-party rule, or the Right forces a return to normal politics, where both sides have legitimacy. (Personally, I favor a complete inversion of the Left's goal, extirpating their poison, not leveling the playing field, but today is not about me.)

Cleverly, Anton begins with a super-detailed study of California. He is a native Californian, so well-positioned to perform this analysis. If you are rich, California is still pretty awesome, though quite inconvenient at times. For everyone else, it is bad, and getting worse, fast. Nobody can deny, and the Left in fact advertises, that they aim to remake the entire nation in the image of California, both in by whom it is ruled and in the laws the rulers impose. This is claimed to be a good thing, whereby the whole country would be greatly improved—if not a paradise, well on its way to becoming one. Underlying this claim is the belief that California is effectively a successful nation-state, with a world-bestrident economy. I have disposed of the economic claim earlier; Anton focuses less on this claim and more on the social disaster that California is. The self-image of California among its ruling class, and the image it projects to the rest of the country, is the picture postcard of the super-wealthy coastal slice of California, sprinkled with a few natural wonders elsewhere in the state. This is a mirage, because most of California is actually a terrible place to live.

This is new in the past few decades and was not inevitable. The promised land was what California really was, not that long ago—Anton offers a sepia-tinted snapshot of what it was fifty years ago, at the time of *The Brady Bunch*, a place where a man could raise six children on a middle-class income, inside Los Angeles, in a detached single-family home. As a direct result of the Left's power and consequent ability to implement their deliberate policies, that California is dead. The state is now crowded, costly, congested, crumbling, incompetent, filthy, dangerous, rapacious, profligate, suffocating, prejudiced, theocratic, pathologically altruistic, balkanized, and feudal—and Anton crisply

proves each of these claims. Driving home his point, just a few weeks ago, not mentioned here, California has proposed a new wealth tax—that would apply for ten years to anyone with modest wealth who dares to move out of state to escape the nightmare. A better symbol summing up California would be hard to find, though I suppose you could use the power blackouts, the unpunished violent crime, or the filth covering the streets of all its major cities to add a little color.

What caused this disaster, asks Anton? Four related things—tens of millions of poor immigrants, mostly illegal; the rejection of the melting pot; the massive success of Silicon Valley and resulting highly-concentrated wealth; and the total elimination of the Californian middle class. All this cemented the power of the Left at the same time the social fabric was deliberately ripped apart. The Left's power is maintained as the result of a corrupt bargain between the Left and the super-rich, of which California has plenty. In that bargain, the woke Left is kept in power by the oligarchy, the richest Californians (whom Anton calls dukes, offering a complete mapping of California power onto a feudal hierarchy), as long as the dukes are allowed to do what they want to increase their wealth—e.g., Apple. The woke Left can then impose, and does impose, its desired policies without fear of contradiction. The result is, as always when the Left is in power, utter disaster on every level, social and financial, for the common man, with the polity descending quickly to somewhere between Venezuela and Somalia. That's bad enough—but Anton's key point is that the Left, our enemies, wants all of America to be just like California.

Having grabbed the reader's attention, and made the prepared reader run to his safe for a quick gun count, Anton turns back to earlier history, focusing on what the American political system was designed to be and do. Not because he thinks the reader doesn't know, but in order to specifically address objections to the American "parchment" from both the Right and the Left. On the Right, Anton examines past and present objections in detail, mostly relating to skepticism that America is or can be "propositional," rather than centered around more visceral ties. He ends with John Calhoun's demand for "concurrent majoritarianism," better called "group rights," the idea that the ruling minority of the time could not be overruled, which theory was created as a defense of slavery and in opposition to the bedrock American claim that "all men

are created equal.” On the Left, Anton reviews, among much else, the original Progressives and their successors, the 1960s Left, noting that the core of their philosophy is indistinguishable from Calhoun’s concurrent majoritarianism. It differs only in that it is in service of different rulers, and it has concluded in today’s unhinged and anti-realist demands for the forced “equality” and “corrective justice” extolled by the cretinous John Rawls. Demands, in all of their multiplying manifestations, utterly incompatible with the American parchment.

Where does that leave “our present regime”? Here Anton refers to Christopher Caldwell’s recent *The Age of Entitlement*, describing how the quest for black civil rights morphed into demands for special rights and privileges, for everyone but heterosexual white men, the poisonous fruits of which change have roiled America over the past few months. “Inequality before the law—based on race, but also on sex and sexual orientation—is the true animating principle of the American regime as it exists and operates now.” This is justified as corrective—but the gap between the supposedly privileged and the supposedly subordinated never changes, requiring not a reevaluation, but ever more violent demands. Crucially, this woke Left ascendancy is intertwined with neoliberalism, what Anton calls “managerial leftist-libertarianism,” in effect creating a nationwide oligarchical system devoted to implementing Left policies without the consent of the governed, for whom contempt mixed with hatred are the only emotions of the ruling classes. We get kraitarchy, corruption, electoral manipulation, weaponized “justice,” and much more, but all these corruptions serve the same goals.

This sounds somewhat dry, but Anton manages to both prove each of his points in detail and to write in a fluid, compelling fashion that pulls the reader along. He frames much of his discussion around the concepts of the Narrative (the message the ruling classes demand be accepted without question); the Megaphone (the instruments of propaganda through which the Narrative is broadcast at constant maximum volume); and the Muzzle (the relatively new and ever-more-powerful system of crushing wrongthink). The Narrative is nearly all simply lies, about everything from rape to racism. The Megaphone is repetition of those lies, combined with the (so-far successful) ability to deny the legitimacy of any alternative media. The Muzzle is raw force, up to and including murder, as has recently been seen in Portland and Kenosha

(though in that latter one target, the heroic Kyle Rittenhouse, fortunately got the first shots off).

The Narrative encompasses everything from sexual ideology to denying the noxious racism of BLM, and the system Anton sketches is instantly recognizable all around, the water that we swim in, if you simply look for a moment. Examples of how these three reinforcing Left tools work are infinite. Just in the past few days we have seen a small but telling example, also indicative of the Left's plan for November's election. The *Atlantic* magazine made up an obvious total lie about Trump insulting veterans, with zero evidence, which fit the Narrative; the Megaphone immediately broadcast it everywhere, going so far as to claim that repetition of the claim by different news outlets was itself "confirmation," a second obvious total lie. And the Muzzle was deployed to ensure that pushback was silenced. Rinse and repeat.

After laying out his framework, Anton writes much more in this vein, discussing in one chapter, "The Ruling Class and Its Armies," what the ruling class is, what and why it wants, and how it achieves its ends. In another chapter, he addresses immigration. He weaves together history, present-day events, and classical thought from Machiavelli to Montesquieu, all in coherent exposition of How We Got Here. It is brilliant (and I did not know Dan Quayle coined the odious phrase "Diversity is our strength")—but you will have to read the book, because this is not CliffsNotes, and I want to move to the second half of the book, which discusses the future.

Anton divides his examination of the future into "If Present Trends Continue . . ." followed by "And If They Don't . . ." He does not offer odds on either possibility, nor on the sub-possibilities that might follow each—but he does discuss reasons making any given outcome more or less likely. As to present trends continuing, he says "It's at least possible that our ruling class are not all total fools. . . . [T]hey might know what they're doing and know how to keep things going, if not forever, for a very long time." First, they have to defeat Trump this year. Then, they have to use the Narrative, Megaphone, and Muzzle to re-impose the status quo ante. More immigration, more inequality, more blurring the distinction between business and government, more surveillance, enforced with Portland-style anarcho-tyranny and selective justice, and the final cementing of a one-party state. More California, that is,

and sedation of discontent with drugs and porn, with isolation, ruin and jail for anyone who fights back. This is James Poulos's "pink police state," or Rod Dreher's "soft totalitarianism."

Anton doesn't think this is very likely, I am happy to report, though maybe he is just whistling past the graveyard. One-party rule has a history of being fatal to the party ruling, as it loses touch, and therefore all legitimacy. For the Left, this problem is exacerbated by that their rule is always and everywhere synonymous with incompetency. Most of all, their rule means the end of American excellence and therefore of any achievement whatsoever, and with that they would lose the ability to distribute adequate rewards to ever-more-greedy supporters, whose only means of support is parasitism and theft. Such a one-party state could therefore not maintain either internal or external American power; it would quickly become simply an extractive basket-case—that is, it would become the "People's Republic" of Kurt Schlichter novels (though Anton does not mention those). In theory, the ruling regime might avoid collapse by adopting something like the Ottoman millet system for red states and areas, which could be left to a large degree of self-governance, but taxed, since they would be the only productive areas of the country. But the Left won't allow such a system, because it violates their ideology of supposed justice, which motivates their shock troops. No totalitarian can abide embedded opposition; it is a constant rebuke that cannot be tolerated.

Nonetheless, we can be certain that if they regain full power in 2020, it's pedal to the metal for the Left, in an attempt to create a Woke utopia. They are like the scorpion in the fable about the turtle—overreaching in pursuit of evil is in their nature. And true, there is some possibility the Left could maintain Wokeamerica forever, through technology. But probably not. A political entity bound together by an ideology centered on fractalized identity groups and stealing from others is nearly certain to fall apart.

Which brings us to "And If They Don't . . .", the most interesting part of the most interesting book of the year. This is not where Anton spins Right fantasies of national American civic renewal and renaissance; he is practical to a fault. One possibility, relatively peaceful, is that America continues, but Red America and Blue America physically sort to a much greater degree, as people move to areas more congenial

to them (something that anecdotally is well under way), resulting in an increased separation in practice, which might maintain peace. (As a side note, that “Red” is used for the Right in America, a choice made by the Left in order to avoid drawing attention to their responsibility for the more than one hundred million people killed by Communists, is both jarring and annoying, but I suppose for now is the common lingo.)

But as I say, Red America in any shape or form cannot be tolerated by the Left, or not for long. In theory, Anton points out, it could be tolerated in the same way the Parisian authorities tolerate the no-go areas of the Muslim Parisian *banlieues*—especially if attempts to impose Left will in those areas were met with resistance, ranging to effective violence, as they are in Paris. Certainly the hair-trigger focus on suppressing any effective Right paramilitary organization, combined with every federal agency heavily arming itself, suggests that some on the Left in power today see this as a real possibility. However, this semi-separation, another variation on the millet system, would only work if the Left maintains its own coherency, which as Anton says is not likely, given its internal contradictions.

So complete crackup is likely, though we can get there by more than one path. It might happen in some years, after a period of Left terrorism. But it might happen much sooner. If Trump wins resoundingly in November, the Left could demand exit. The Right would likely be happy with that (I know I would be). However, such demands are likely to be mere ineffective caterwauling; the Left cannot abide anything but total power in service of its utopian goals, and views Red America as contemptible and deserving of punishment. They would never leave Red America to do as it pleases, or give up the productivity of the Red states. Nonetheless, if crackup were to happen, through whatever mechanism, it could be peaceful (think the breakup of Czechoslovakia), or it could be not peaceful (think Yugoslavia). As with all possibilities he outlines, Anton evaluates this in some detail, down to post-crackup relations among the new groupings—both warlike and not.

A crackup, though, is really a middle ground—the possibility we could return to the original American system, to the parchment, but only in some subset of today’s America. Anton’s Straussianism shows through. But he is not a prisoner to it—he next considers a complete change of political life, to Caesarism. Offering (as always) precise

definitions, he points out that Caesarism is not tyranny, but one-man rule “halfway, as it were, between monarchy and tyranny.” It is monarchy not “legitimated by time and tradition.” But that does not make it illegitimate; “Caesars assume responsibility for a government that no longer functions. We may define Caesarism, therefore, as authoritarian one-man rule partially legitimized by necessity.” When the nation no longer works, when the ruling class, and for that matter the people, are corrupted, Caesar is the solution that preserves the nation from its external enemies and destroys its internal enemies, and this has innumerable historical precedents.

Not that Anton is recommending Caesarism. “The benefits of Caesarism to Caesar are obvious; to a nation, perhaps less so.” But this is the whatever the opposite of damning with faint praise is—endorsing with tepid criticism, I suppose. A well-executed Caesarism brings calm and can bring flourishing; this is what history teaches. Even a dubious Caesarism, of which Putinism is perhaps a modern example (not one Anton offers), is often preferable to the alternatives. Anton discusses, in part relying on Machiavelli, how “principality” arises, and notes that since the Blue ruling class is already in power, they are less likely to turn to a Caesar than the Reds, under constant attack and with diminishing power. He also distinguishes ideological from practical Caesars, and then turns to analyzing the possibility and practice of both a Blue Caesar and a Red Caesar.

A non-ideological Blue Caesar might be like a charismatic Michael Bloomberg—more of the same Left program, but tamping down the extremes and the violence, leading to a potentially long-lasting soul-crushing neoliberal hell. Antifa would be kept leashed except when needed; human resources hags would get even more power. A woke Blue Caesar would simply be a nasty system, hobbling along on an axis somewhere between Hillary Clinton and Pol Pot. Not a stable system, and one likely to collapse under the weight of its own intersectional contradictions, but possible. More likely is Red Caesar, which has plenty of historical precedent. A Red Caesar would likely have the support of “the country’s largest and best-armed single bloc, with much accumulated wealth, social capital, and expertise at everyday necessities at its disposal.” (In other words, what Anton is too polite to say, non-ruling class white America, with an admixture of based non-whites.) He’d also

likely be supported by the non-corrupt echelons of the military, and by law enforcement, and not be challenged on his own side. Despite leftist fantasies, there is no chance of an ideological Red Caesar, Anton says. (I'm not so sure about this. Anton essentially ignores religion in this book, which I think is a gap. He also rejects population decline as problem, my only substantive disagreement with him.) It won't be the American parchment; it won't be ordered liberty. It might be okay, though.

Anton concludes, however, that Red Caesar is unlikely, because the Reds lack power. This seems like an error (or more likely disingenuous). The path is obvious. When the Left attempts a coup after Trump's November victory, as it will (something Anton this week himself has been warning of, and as seen in the lies about Trump slandering troops, something they are already preparing for), using its control of the corrupt upper echelons of the military, the response will likely be, and definitely should be, extensive violence directed at crushing both the coup and all Left power. Such a scenario requires a leader, and that leader will likely become Red Caesar. It could be Trump, but probably not, since he is so undisciplined (though he might remain a figurehead for a while). More likely it will be someone of whom we have never heard; such times call forth exactly such men.

Me, I like, if not love, the idea of Red Caesar, the creation of an Augustan system. I am not a Straussian; there is no way back to the parchment, which was a good system for its time and society, both of which are over. A new thing for a new day, though informed by the wisdom of the past. Let's get on with it. True, Red Caesar might be very bad. I doubt if Caesar will allow me to keep my guns; he may confiscate my wealth, or conscript my sons. After defeating our common enemies, he may see internal enemies everywhere, and strike at them, in the manner of many of the Roman emperors. But Caesarism, and its time-legitimated successor, monarchy, is a natural, realism-based system, under which a civilization can flourish. (Maybe Elon Musk can be king and lead us to Mars.) Over time, perhaps a mixed government could be re-established (and, in fact, even so-called one-man rule always involves multiple power centers and is therefore a type of mixed government; as Ortega said, too, force follows public opinion, so Caesar must keep the goodwill of the people). We could have Napoleon, man of destiny, but following him not a slow slide to odious liberalism, as we

muddled through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but the tides of history instead going back out to sea, drowning forever the failed political systems based on the Enlightenment, leaving us with a sensible political system, run for the good of the whole by those suited to run it, and with the Left forever as discredited and relevant as worshippers of Mithras are today.

Anton shifts toward the end to a positive note, suggesting one peaceful way out might be to allow extensive voluntary reorganization of states, counties, and cities, what might be called “secession-lite,” leading to greater pluralism. It’s a nice thought. He also talks about how a new political program could avoid all of these results fatal to the America created in 1787, operating the entire nation with a brighter future within the frame of today’s Constitution. He says “I expect others to insist that what I here propose is impossible.” He’s right. I do insist, and I’m pretty sure he thinks so too, although facially what he proposes is completely coherent—roughly equivalent to implementing the Tucker Carlson program. A nice dream, but it will never happen through normal channels, because the Left would never allow it. It’s charming that Anton tries to be positive, but the main feeling one gets from this book is that Anton is a new and better Cassandra—one who is not fated to be disbelieved, but is instead providing an immensely valuable service.

To get to any better future, though, what we’re going to get first is war. Small war, big war, we’ll find out. A year from now, I predict a lot of lead will have flown through the air in the preceding twelve months. Stay safe, and stay frosty.