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Book Review by Daniel McCarthy

FASTEN YOUR SEATBELTS

After the Flight 93 Election: The Vote that Saved America and What We Still Have to Lose, by Michael Anton.
Encounter Books, 104 pages, \$14.99



A MEASURE OF MICHAEL ANTON'S SUCCESS in "The Flight 93 Election" is the envy that his essay continues to elicit to this day. Writing for the *CRB's* website in September 2016, Anton did what his legion of critics are well paid to do, yet routinely fail to achieve: he correctly analyzed a momentous turn in American political life. And his shocking recommendations actually mattered to the presidential election that fall: he gave nerve to voters who were already in revolt but who saw only fear and shame when they looked to conservatism's princes for leadership. More than any other contribution to the debates surrounding the 2016 election, "The Flight 93 Election" made support for Donald Trump morally and intellectually credible—even imperative.

Anton did for Trump what no one had been able to do for Hillary Clinton or the battalion

of contenders for the Republican nomination earlier that year. Writing as Publius Decius Mus, Anton changed men's souls by the action of his words. However great or modest that change may have been, it was more than anything the institutional punditocracy had been able to accomplish in living memory. So the reception he received from the opinion-dispensing classes was not a warm one. They accused him of cowardice for writing under a pseudonym. They charged him with bad taste for co-opting the memory of the Flight 93 martyrs. They said he was irresponsible to press his case in such stark terms. To make any argument at all for Donald Trump was crime enough, a deed as deplorable as the man himself and the rabble that supported him.

None of this would have been worth saying if the essay had not had an explosive force that critics recognized instantly. Anton was

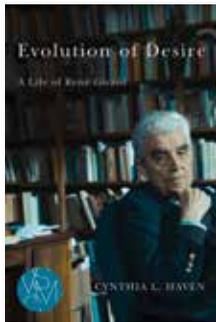
not just a heretic, he was one who would be heard and heeded. He was also one who was prepared to confront his accusers. A week after the original essay, he published a "Restatement on Flight 93" in reply to his critics. And now he has gone further, combining both earlier pieces with an extensive "Pre-Statement on Flight 93" and "A Note on 'Decius'" in this slim yet well-honed enchiridion from Encounter Books.

BUT WE'RE NOW THREE YEARS PAST THE showdown between Trump and Clinton. Is there really a need to read Anton's essay again in 2019, even with 60 pages of new material to introduce it?

The answer is yes, for the simple reason that a single election, a single revolt, is only the first skirmish in a long war to retake our institutions and re-establish their principles.

Spring forward with a new read

Cynthia L. Haven

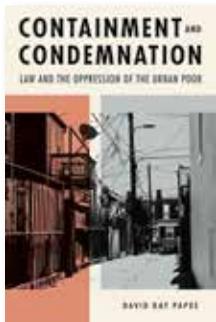


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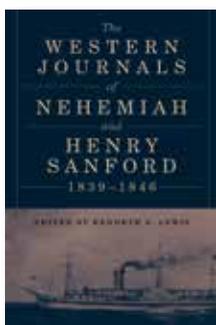


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The New Deal was only consolidated after four consecutive presidential elections, three under Franklin Roosevelt and one under his successor, Harry Truman. Some would say even then the acquiescence of the next president, two-term Republican Dwight Eisenhower, was necessary to entrench the welfare state beyond possibility of repeal. What’s more, while Donald Trump won the last election, there is a sense in which Flight 93 is not yet diverted. Electoral success and policy transformation are two different things—to say nothing of establishing a new spirit behind all policy. Anton’s analysis therefore has the same urgency today as it did when it was first published. The country is still in a moment of peril.

THE NEW CONTENT HE PROVIDES sharpens his original points, not by repeating his arguments but by tracing their lines further back. Critics complained that “The Flight 93 Election” was apocalyptic and purely negative, leaving unanswered the question of just what kind of country Publius Decius Mus was fighting for. The “Pre-Statement on Flight 93” makes transparent what should have been plain enough to most readers from the beginning. Anton is not a radical, an enemy of the Constitution, an authoritarian, or a right-wing revolutionary. What he argues for is what most Americans once understood their country to stand for. That includes a grasp of right and wrong as moral realities with political implications, a respect for America’s religious and philosophical roots, and an appreciation of the difficulties inherent in exporting our constitutionalism to lands that have not had the long preparation for self-government that our forefathers enjoyed. “[F]orm,” writes Anton, “must always fit matter,” which here means

the actual country, the “facts on the ground”: the people, their language, traditions, customs, and religion(s); the topography, resources, and climate; the geographical site and situation, and relations with neighbors and other world powers. “Form” is the regime, or mode of government, and above all the principles informing that mode.

The universality of principle that one finds in the Declaration of Independence and the political thought of Aristotle or John Locke does not entail uniformity of practice. This truth ought to keep us modest: our laws and habits as fulfillments of our principles might inform and inspire others, but they cannot be transplanted directly to foreign climes.

Translation, rather than transplantation, is the appropriate metaphor. It is also the appropriate metaphor for the process of citizen-formation that newcomers to the U.S. must undergo—the alien who becomes a citizen, or whose children do, is not to remain a disunited element but to become part of our national idiolect, even if he retains a trace of an old accent. “Republican government requires a measure of commonality in customs, habits, and opinions,” Anton explains. “Republicanism is not possible when the people becomes so fractured that private or sectional or group interests override agreement on the common good.”

HE GIVES ELOQUENT EXPRESSION TO a philosophically grounded constitutional nationalism. But his critics refuse to acknowledge the possibility of such a thing; they reject the very concepts that long characterized most Americans’ understanding of America. To speak of a nation with definite borders and a particular citizenry is now taken for outright blood-and-soil ethnonationalism. Anton not only rejects ethnonationalism, however, he shows that the “denial of the principle of equal natural rights in favor of an assertion of group rights” was clearly “understood by its adherents and opponents alike” as “inherently at odds with the principles of the American founding.” The philosophy of John C. Calhoun represents for Anton one of “[t]hree peculiarly American lines of attack” upon America’s solution to the perennial problems of human nature and earthly justice.

The other two lines of attack come from the Left and have much more currency today. The Progressive movement aimed to reduce deliberative, democratic politics to an administrative science: Anton aptly quotes Friedrich Engels, “[t]he government of persons is replaced by the administration of things.” The Constitution was an impediment to scientific administration. So, too often, were the American people themselves. They had to be reformed, re-educated, and wherever possible excluded from decision-making about matters best left to enlightened experts. “Obviously, only the correct understanding of any issue should inform policy,” Anton notes, but for the progressive agenda, “as knowledge increases in volume and complexity, it becomes understandable to fewer and fewer,” until only the narrowest of elites is fit to run the state.

Administrative statism took hold in the Progressive era and never relinquished its grip on power. But it has been joined by a more recent, and perhaps even more dangerous, negation of the American way of self-



government. This third and latest corruption involves how elites both inside and outside of government understand justice. The Harvard philosophy professor John Rawls redefined justice as “fairness,” meaning not a level playing field among competitors but rather equality of outcomes. As Anton summarizes, “The purpose of public policy—of government itself—is (or must be made to be) to achieve ‘genuine’ equality through the redistribution of goods such as power, wealth, and honors from the ‘privileged’ to the ‘disadvantaged.’” Rawls and his followers did allow for inequality to continue to exist if doing so actually served the disadvantaged better than strict leveling would do. But this apparent concession to reality, Anton notices, has the practical effect of excusing every kind of inequality as long as it is accompanied by sufficient devotion to left-wing politics: “This explains, for instance, why the Left does not merely tolerate but celebrates the massive wealth concentrations and tax-favored status of universities and why it adulates tech CEOs and ‘woke’ celebrities.”

THE PERVERSE REDEFINITION OF JUSTICE does not end there, however. Separately from Rawls, so-called “social justice” has reintroduced the idea of group rights. Justice as fairness is not enough for the exponents of identity politics, Anton observes: “it is insufficiently concerned with the *causes* of disadvantage” for one thing; “it is concerned only with *present* disadvantage and has nothing to say about *past* disadvantage,” for another; and Rawls’s approach “focuses on *individual* disadvantage to the exclusion of *group* disadvantage.” A historical score must be settled, and so by the standards of social justice, “The suffering of one’s ancestors—insofar as that suffering is not outweighed by injustice committed by said ancestors—is decisive for one’s

fortunes and social position today. This is why it is not enough to aim remedial policies only at individuals; they must be extended across entire demographic groups.”

The problem with this “social” account of justice is that it just is not true. “The leftist enterprise has staked its success on an absurd and obviously false account of inequality,” Anton writes, which holds “that all inequality is the result of injustice or oppression.” The Left tends to deny that inequalities of many just and natural kinds arise as the result of individual character and behavior. To suppress this obvious truth and promote in its place the preferred but false account requires constant policing of speech and thought, which Anton calls “the second-most sinister feature of modern leftism.” “There are,” he warns, “only two ways to maintain public support for a proposition that is obviously false: compound the lies, or suppress and punish dissent. Indeed, the two go together because the more the lies pile up, the more dissent must be suppressed.” Rawls was a liberal of sorts, but today’s Left is markedly intolerant and illiberal. It has to be.

YET THE LEFT’S MOST SINISTER ATTRIBUTE is not its attempt at thought-control and enforced unreality but rather, Anton argues, its “spiritual sickness, the self-loathing and existential despair, with which it has infected the formerly confident and capable West.” The philosophy and faith and the constitutional habits that made America great are all undercut by the Left’s hatred of its own parent civilization. For Anton, “The fundamental choice we face in our time is whether to maintain the consensus in favor of self-loathing and self-destruction or return to life and the conditions of life: the rule of law, responsible freedom, confidence in our civilization, patriotism, and concern for the common good instead of only the

particular good of groups claiming oppression or disadvantage.”

A recovery of the sources of our republic, and a rejection of the ideological disease that is ravaging it today, is the necessary foundation for enduring changes in policy. As far as the Left is concerned, based on its deep theoretical commitments, “Globalism, wide-open trade, financialization, mass immigration, foreign war without end or clear connection to the national interest (to say nothing of victory), promotion of the left-liberal social agenda at home and abroad—all these are simply held to be nonnegotiable.”

Two Romans named Publius Decius Mus, a father and son, sacrificed themselves in battles a generation apart for the encouragement of their countrymen, who in each case took heart from their commander’s martyrdom and fought on to victory. (A third Publius Decius Mus, the grandson, may also have died at war.) Michael Anton only sacrificed a career, albeit a lucrative one in corporate America, by taking his stand in writing “The Flight 93 Election.” His critics wondered how he dared compare himself to Decius or Flight 93’s Todd Beamer. They missed the point. Anton has given of himself what civil politics demands, both through his writing and in his service in the Trump Administration as deputy assistant to the president for strategic communication. Few indeed in a country still as blessed as ours are called upon to pay the price that the Decii and the passengers of Flight 93 paid. What Anton has done, however, is to remind us of their heroic examples, so that they might embolden us to do what is necessary in peacetime to save our republic from its enemies without arms, the enemies of the spirit.

Daniel McCarthy is the editor of Modern Age: A Conservative Review.

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