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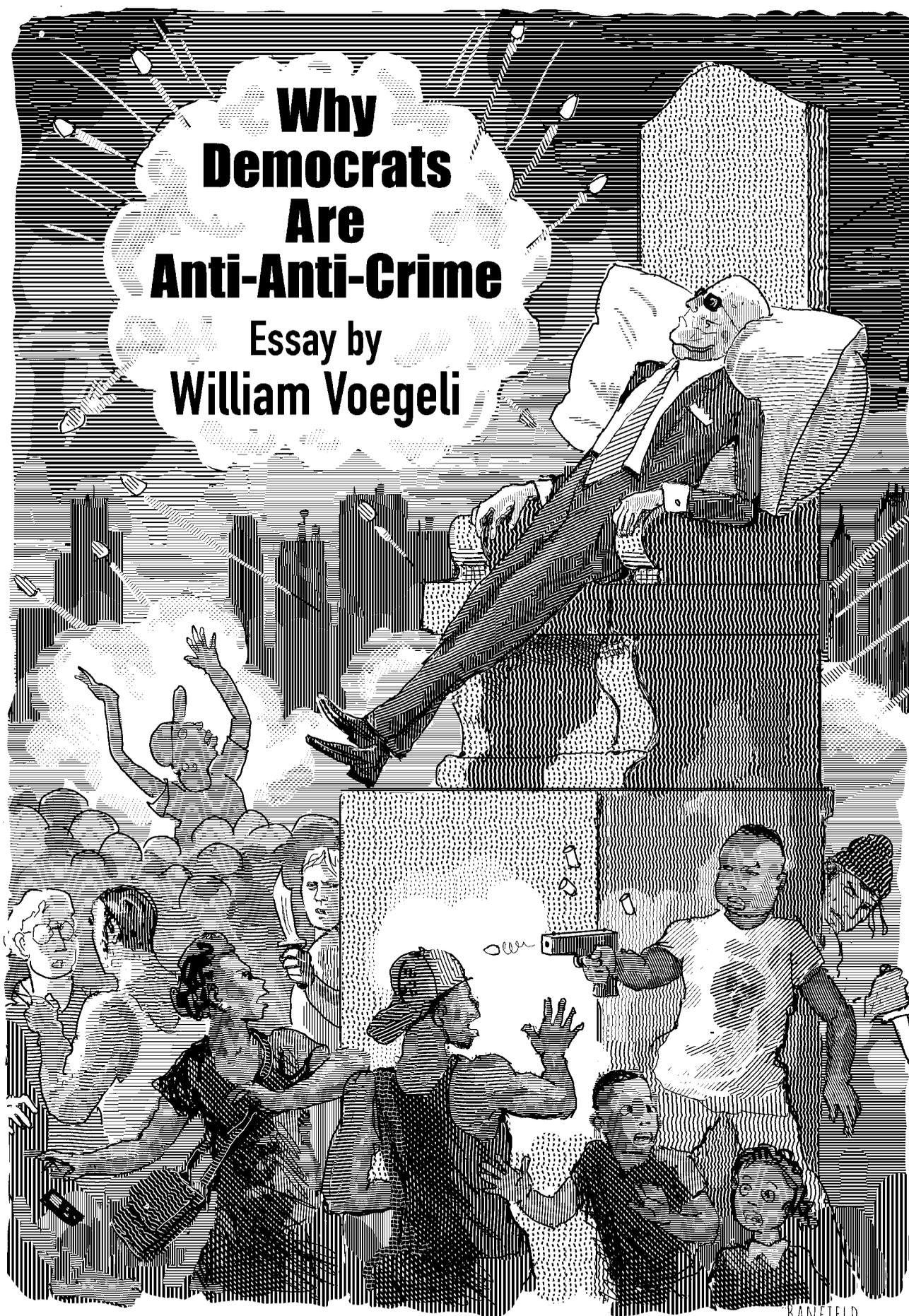
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Anderson:
**The Masking
of America**

Christopher
Caldwell:
**Twilight
of Italy**

James W.
Ceaser:
**The Big
Book of
Conservatism**

Glenn
Ellmers:
**Why
Harry V. Jaffa
Matters**

Amy L.
Wax:
**Raising a
Family
Today**



Michael
Anton:
**Texas vs.
California**

Eric
Kaufmann
♦
Peter C.
Myers:
**The Woke
Awakening**

Myron
Magnet:
**Pestritto's
Progressives**

Charles
Murray:
**The Tyranny
of Merit**

Larry P.
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♦
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Flannery:
**Patrick J.
Garrity, RIP**

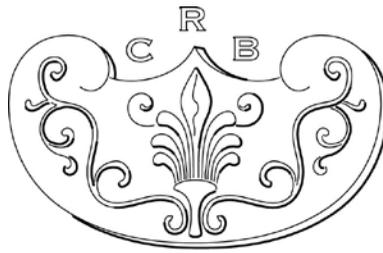
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Book Review by Michael Anton

RIGHT FLIGHT

Texas vs. California: A History of Their Struggle for the Future of America, by Kenneth P. Miller.
Oxford University Press, 384 pages, \$99 (cloth), \$29.95 (paper)

IN THE PREFACE TO *TEXAS VS. CALIFORNIA*, Kenneth Miller indicates that he finished his manuscript in May 2020. That makes it unusually prescient for an academic book. For at that time, three key events lay ahead: the summer in which some 220 American cities were looted and burned following the death of George Floyd (leading to the worst urban crime wave since the 1960s, which continues to this day), the full effect of the coronavirus lockdown and mask mandate, and the outcome of the 2020 election.

The three together have accelerated a new Great Migration from Blue to Red America. Almost 20 years ago, journalist Bill Bishop coined the term “Big Sort” to describe how Americans were self-segregating—by culture, religion, and even media consumption, especially news. Bishop’s “sort” was mostly intra-regional and granular, more a matter of where you lived *within* a given metro area or state than *in which* metro or state. But in more recent years, as America has become even more polarized, the sort has become more regional and state-to-state.

Now the migration appears to be a flood. As a result of the 2020 Census, Red states will gain three congressional seats (meaning Blues will lose three). California is losing one for the first time in its history. The fastest-growing states are nearly all solidly Red or, at

most, fuchsia (e.g., Arizona, Nevada). Everyone knows someone who’s moved to Texas or Florida. Many of us know several. Building costs in suburbs, exurbs, and Red states generally are soaring. Whatever Blue America has to offer—and it is not negligible—the Red model appears, at least right now, to be more attractive.

THE ROSE ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF State and Local Government and now the director of the Rose Institute at Claremont McKenna College, Miller has given us an appropriately political-science account of the roots of this movement, focused on two states he considers, with good reason, to be the respective capitals of Red and Blue America. In addition to some history explaining how each state got the way it is, he provides plenty of charts, graphs, and maps, plus abundant and lengthy footnotes to make his case. Although the book is not exactly breezy, neither is it written in dense academese; nor, unlike in so much mainstream political science, are the charts and graphs inapt window dressing to make a weak argument look strong. Miller mostly makes his case.

A native Californian who married a Texan, Miller professes to see the merits in both states’ differing approaches to governance and is even-handed throughout. Beyond the fact

that he lives in California rather than Texas (which for all I know could be simply for job reasons), I couldn’t tell which, if either, of the two states he prefers. (I hope that doesn’t get him in trouble with colleagues who expect him, as a matter of course, to be a partisan of the Blue Way.)

MILLER’S THESIS IS THAT, IN ADDITION to geographical, historical, cultural, economic, and structural differences, Texas and California have diverged specifically because of deliberately differing policy choices.

Yet he spends a good part of the book’s early pages explaining how similar the states really are. They’re both big, in terms of population (numbers one and two in the Union) and area (two and three). They’re both Western—with all that entails culturally and geographically. They both were briefly independent republics (though California’s was quasi-farcical and much shorter-lived). California was a free state and Texas joined the Confederacy, but slavocracy never had as much of a hold in the Lone Star State as in the rest of the South. Both states were more or less untouched by the Civil War (although, as Miller points out, Texas’s self-identity is as much Southern as it is Western). They share (or shared) many of the same big industries, from agriculture



to oil to tech (remember Texas Instruments? Ross Perot's Electronic Data Systems?). They both had, from their beginnings, substantial Latino populations and deep connections to their Spanish-Mexican roots.

But a few decades ago, the two states began to go in radically different directions, one toward high taxes and tight regulation, the other toward low taxes and light regulation. (Guess which favors which?) The heart of Miller's book is an examination of these differing approaches not just to taxation and regulation, but to economics generally, labor, energy and the environment, and social issues. These chapters are solidly descriptive and Miller refrains from taking sides, reserving his modest criticisms for the final chapter.

Given the immense differences, it would seem that if either the progressive or the conservative mode of governance were simply best, one state should be leaving the other in the dust. But Miller claims both have "flourished" in recent years. Have they, though? Leave aside for the moment the population question—Texas is attracting, and California shedding, residents—as more effect than cause. Miller builds his case for a flourishing California along familiar lines: its handful of world-dominating industries, its influence on the broader culture, top-shelf attractions and institutions, and alleged quality of life.

Only with respect to the first is Miller really on strong ground. Big Tech and Hollywood certainly are enviable assets if one's foremost concerns are GDP and national and global influence. What they do for California's (dwindling) cohort of ordinary middle-class citizens is harder to see. Yes, given California's extremely progressive tax structure—1% of the state's earners pay more than half the income tax revenue—these industries and their leaders disproportionately contribute to the state's massive welfare bureaucracy. But how much does that really matter to the average Joe?

CALIFORNIA'S IMPLICIT MESSAGE IS similar to former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's description of his city as a "luxury product": sure, it's expensive, but it's expensive because it's awesome, and if you can't afford it, that's because you're a loser. In California, supposedly, one pays a lot to get a lot. But what does one really get? As William Voegeli pointed out in detail a dozen years ago, California's public services are not merely expensive but also inefficient and incompetent ("Failed State," *CRB*, Fall 2009). The state's real governance model is the "big-spending, high-taxing, lousy-services paradigm." Things have gotten worse since

then. (See his "Progressively Worse," *CRB*, Spring 2021.)

Some of California's man-made amenities—the two Getty museums, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Palace of the Legion of Honor, the San Francisco Opera—are (or nearly) world class, for those who care about such things. Other wonders, such as Yosemite, can be attributed to progressive governance only in that the original Progressives preserved these extraordinary natural resources—and using federal, not state, power. California's greatest asset, the weather, is similarly a gift of God and nature.

Miller doesn't mention the state's crumbling infrastructure, the homelessness and crime in its major cities, nor the myriad other ways the Golden State's quality of life for all but moguls and tech lords continues to plummet. Indeed, in certain precincts, public order has all but collapsed. Brazen thieves routinely enter stores with garbage bags and pillow cases, fill them with loot, and stroll out unchallenged. Walgreens alone closed 17 San Francisco stores in the past five years because of shoplifting, a crime the authorities no lon-

Lots of Californians are moving east while very few Texans pass them going the other direction.

ger even make a pretense of deterring or punishing. In my recent book *The Stakes* (2020), I dedicated the first chapter to the decline of California, describing the state as crowded, costly, congested, crumbling, incompetent, filthy, dangerous, rapacious, profligate, suffocating, prejudiced, theocratic, pathologically altruistic, balkanized, and feudal. Granted, I was making a semi-polemical case against the Californication of the entire country, which our elites, from Joe Biden on down, say they want. But if my portrait emphasized California's warts, Miller's feels a little airbrushed.

EVERYTHING IN THE BOOK POINTS TO an eventual showdown, and while the climax lacks the excitement of, say, *High Noon* or *Shane*, Miller does not disappoint. His last chapter speculates as to the future of the two models, both in terms of their competition with one another for residents and businesses and the implications of their rivalry for national politics. But his summary of the relative strengths and weaknesses of each approach feels rigged in order to

seem evenhanded. Can both models really be "equal"? Not in the sense of "identical"—but do the net advantages and disadvantages of each really all balance out so that, in the end, the choice of one or the other comes down to simple preference?

That seems to be the conclusion Miller wishes to draw, but his own summary tells against it. To say nothing of the things he leaves out, the flaws he explicitly identifies in the California model—its unaffordability, sky-high poverty rate, reliance on federal support, feast-or-famine budget process, and essentially undemocratic character—seem to dwarf the main problem he cites with the Texas mode, namely, too-low education spending.

One can even dispute whether the latter is really a problem, given decades of data showing that student achievement doesn't correlate with school spending (some of the highest-spending systems, such as the District of Columbia's, have the worst outcomes) and considering what school districts want to spend money on these days (e.g., critical race theory). California's public schools in any case rank in the bottom quartile among the 50 states. The state's high-end labor force, the backbone of its Blue model, spends lavishly to ensure that its own kids never have to set foot in one.

MILLER SEEMS TO CONCEDE THE point when he writes that "one could argue" that California recently has "flourished...in spite of" its progressivism. On the other hand, he continues, perhaps California's aggressive progressivism attracts the highly paid knowledge-economy workers that make the state the envy of America's Blue elite. But are such workers more attracted by California's deep Blue policies, or Silicon Valley's fat green paychecks? Granted, the two go together, but it's not as if poorer Blue precincts such as Baltimore or Detroit are vacuuming up overclass winners simply by virtue of being Blue.

Miller mentions Louis Brandeis's oft-quoted line about states being the "laboratories of democracy." Applying that to today's competition between Texas and California, once one discounts attractions beyond human influence (beaches, mountains, climate), Texas would seem to be winning on every metric but one: aggregate GDP. But how much does that really matter, especially to the ordinary citizen? It's important to a sovereign state that must field an army and contend with international competition. But to an American state that can (or should be able to) count on Washington to take care of that?

To the dubious extent that California has actually "flourished," it's obvious that its



fruits accrue to a few. The fact that in Texas prosperity is much more widely shared would seem to be a huge advantage and the core reason that lots of Californians are moving east while very few Texans pass them going the other direction.

IF THE COMPETITION WERE ALLOWED TO play out, one suspects that Texas would win in a rout. The only people still moving to California are immigrants, aspiring starlets and screenwriters, and techies dreaming of their first IPO. One wonders how long even the latter migration will last, as the tech sector increasingly disperses to other climes—not just Texas but also Nevada and Florida—to escape California’s punitive taxation, overregulation, and overall incompetence. Palo Alto is still fine, if you can afford it (and few can), but San Francisco has become a disgusting mess and priced only slightly lower. Many are asking, *who needs it?*, and answering with their feet.

But, as Miller hints but refrains from bluntly explaining, the competition will not be allowed to play out because California won’t let it. Miller’s evenhandedness, which mostly serves his book well, breaks down when he insinuates that both states seek to use their influence at the national level to drive federal policy and ultimately to impose their model on the other. The first half of that formulation is true as far as it goes; what state doesn’t send legislators to Washington hoping they’ll influence policy in ways favorable to its interests? But the second is flatly false. Put simply, California wants to rule Texas but Texas doesn’t want to rule California, and especially doesn’t want to be ruled *by* California. These irreconcilable desires set the stage for a great clash, sooner or later.

The divide is most clearly visible with respect to energy. This is Texas’s largest eco-

nomie sector and a non-trivial part of California’s economy, yet the two states see the sector very differently. California’s history is intertwined with energy: the oil industry in a sense built Los Angeles, Kern County is still home to some of the most productive oilfields in the nation, and Chevron, founded in San Francisco in 1879, remains the state’s third-largest company by revenue. But California is embarrassed by this legacy and prefers to emphasize various “green” technologies that, as yet, don’t generate much beyond hype. Texas by contrast is proud of its oilmen and seeks to maximize the benefits from its booming energy sector to the state’s economy, workforce, and treasury. If Texas and California could simply each go its own way—“drill, baby, drill” versus yet another solar panel—peaceful coexistence might be possible. That’s the way Texans see things. If those left-coast fruitcakes want to pay \$5.00 per gallon and suffer rolling blackouts, fine with us and enjoy.

BUT CALIFORNIANS SEE TEXAS AS A mortal threat not merely to their state’s business model and way of life but to humanity itself. Drilling is killing. Texas cannot be allowed to be Texas because if Texans get their way, the planet will superheat, destroying us all. You may think that’s ridiculous hyperbole, and maybe it is, but Californians believe it and will not be talked out of it. Hence peaceful coexistence is, for them, possible only on their terms.

A similar, and more ominous, dynamic is at play with immigration. California wants as much as possible—forever. Most Texans by contrast believe there must be prudent limits. California’s preference, which has ruled national policy for the last half-century, is remaking Texas (and the nation) no less than

it has already remade California. The Golden State is no longer down with living and letting live but must impose its will, against the express wishes of others, in fundamentally transformative ways. There’s a word for that.

Miller cites the divisions of the Civil War but, in my judgment, gets the lesson backward. Americans are *more* divided, not less, than we were on the eve of that great conflict. As Abraham Lincoln put it, accurately, to Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens, back then there was only one “substantial difference between us.” Today it’s hard to think of one substantial commonality. In 1861, the South feared—wrongly—that the North, despite protestations to the contrary, would impose its will come hell or high water. Today’s California makes no such protestations: it insists on its way or the highway. The bad news for Texas would seem to be that, in any such contest, the side that wants it more tends to win.

Then again, while both states have interesting and inspiring histories, only Texas seems to take its to heart. The spirit of the Alamo still burns in Texans, in a way that, one hopes, the Spirit of ’76 still burns in American hearts. There may come a point when Texans stop simply wishing California would buzz off and mind its own business. If the Lone Star way of life is to survive, Texans must fight for it. Then we shall see whether California’s long experiment with postmodern deracination and anti-masculinity can stand up to Texas’s more robust embrace of the old virtues.

I’m not a betting man, but were that conflict to erupt, my money would be on Texas.

Michael Anton is a lecturer and research fellow at Hillsdale College, a former national security official in the Trump Administration, and a senior fellow at the Claremont Institute.

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