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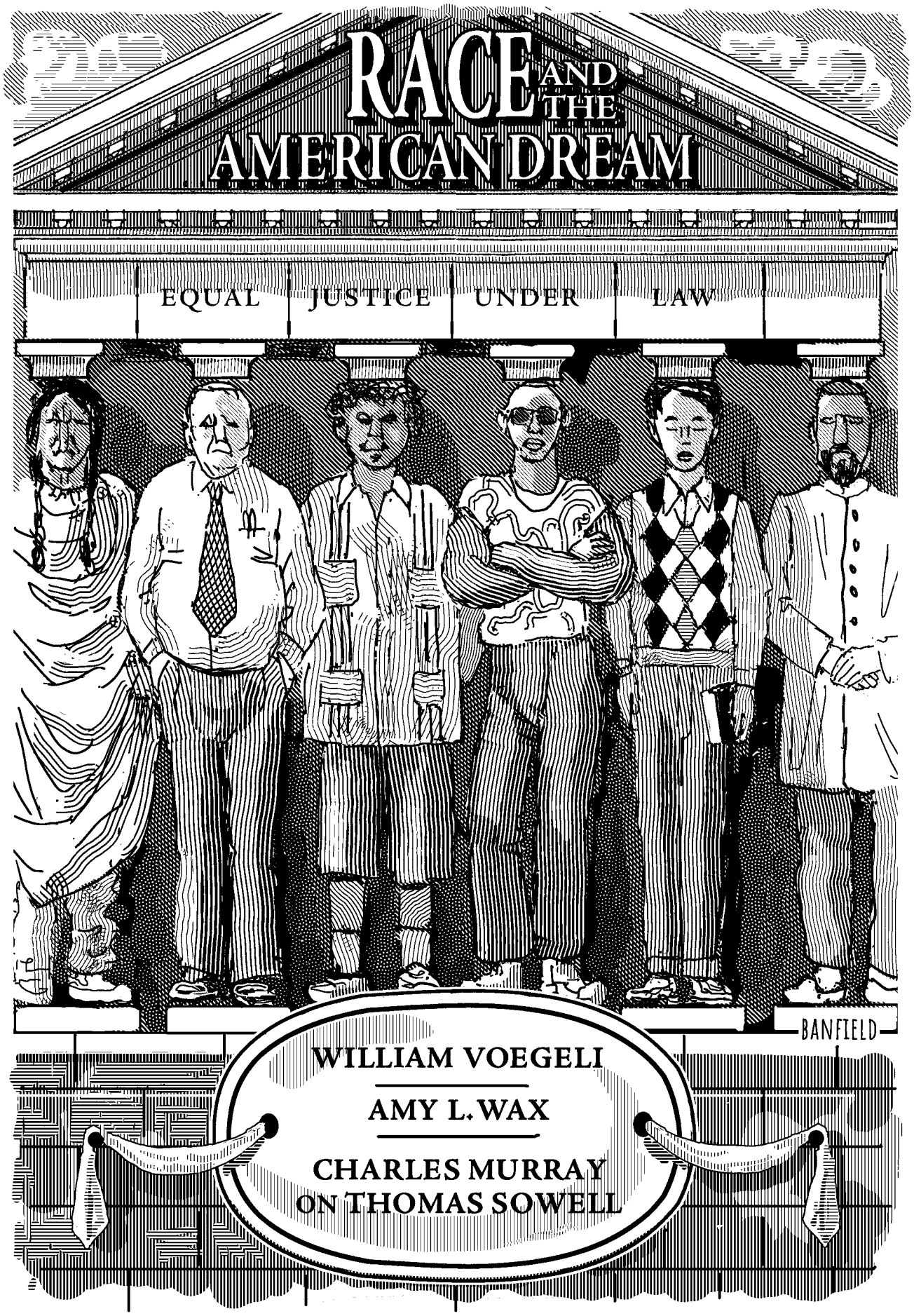

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Book Review by James Piereson

Ourselves and Our Posterity

The Dying Citizen: How Progressive Elites, Tribalism, and Globalization Are Destroying the Idea of America,
by Victor Davis Hanson. Basic Books, 432 pages, $30

The united states constitution of 1787 contains 22 references to "citizen" or "citizens" but never defines the term or specifies the citizen's duties. The founders empowered Congress to enact a uniform rule of naturalization throughout the United States and established citizenship requirements for persons elected as president, senator, and representative, but said nothing further about the meaning of citizenship. Except in very few cases, the Constitution does not distinguish between citizens and non-citizens in the enjoyment of rights set forth in the document.

James Madison described several debates on citizenship in his *Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787*. By and large, they reveal that the framers were reluctant to adopt strict standards for citizenship, such as long residence requirements, because they feared that such rules might discourage the immigration from Europe needed to populate America. Later controversies up to and through the Civil War centered on who was eligible to become a citizen, not on the rights or responsibilities of citizenship. The 14th Amendment, ratified in 1868 to reverse the Supreme Court's decision in *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857), addressed the question of eligibility but said nothing about the broader meaning of citizenship.

Yet the founders were unanimous in thinking that citizenship involved more than the right to vote or to hold public office. They were aware that republican theorists from Cicero to Montesquieu linked the ideal of a free republic to the reciprocal ideal of free citizens. Citizens in a republic "owned" their country, but that required them first to "own" themselves: they had to be free, independent, and well-informed to protect the republic from foreign conquest or prevent it from coming under the control of self-serving factions. The free citizen stood in sharp contrast to the serfs, peasants, and subjects that populated other regimes. Madison, often skeptical regarding this ideal, acknowledged that a degree of citizen virtue was required to guarantee the survival and success of the Constitution.

The founders also argued strongly for what might be called patriotic assimilation of all immigrants in order to create a single "people" with unfiltered loyalty to America and the Constitution. The Naturalization Act of 1795 included a "renunciation clause" requiring aliens to repudiate other sovereign allegiances before they could become American citizens. Successive generations of leaders and educators have taught both the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in patriotic speeches,

civics courses, and other forums. Though the text of the Constitution may have set forth a thin version of citizenship, the framers and their successors assumed that a more active version was required for the republican enterprise to succeed.

Victor Davis Hanson revisits the subject of American citizenship in this impressive new book, *The Dying Citizen: How Progressive Elites, Tribalism, and Globalization Are Destroying the Idea of America*. Classicist, historian, author of a comprehensive history of World War II and numerous books on the history of ancient Greece and Rome, Hanson is well-positioned to describe the evolution of citizenship from ancient times through the modern era, and especially the assumptions about citizenship underlying America's constitutional order. His title distills his thesis: the ideal of the American citizen—anchor of the republic, the Constitution, and the nation-state—is eroding due to the growing influence of bureaucrats, experts, identity-group spokesmen, and progressives who claim that there is nothing exceptional about America nor anything especially ennobling about American citizenship.

Hanson presents, clearly and concisely, a case that critics will struggle to refute. His troubling argument has far-reaching implications. *The Dying Citizen* is a book that all Americans should read, then discuss with friends and neighbors.

The ideals of citizenship were originally formulated in the city-states of ancient Greece and later in the Roman Republic. The two ideals—citizenship and republicanism—evolved jointly and in combination: citizens made republics, and republics made citizens. By the 5th century B.C., Hanson writes, most native-born males enjoyed the privileges of citizenship in Greek city-states: the right to participate in popular assemblies and juries, to vote in elections, and to hold and pass along property to heirs, along with correlative responsibilities to serve in armies to defend their polis's borders and way of life. Republican Rome expanded the Greek ideal by codifying the citizen's rights and responsibilities into law. These included the guarantee of habeas corpus, access to courts of law, the right to hold property, and the power to participate in making laws citizens were obliged to follow. Free citizens had the duty to shape the direction of the polity. Greek and Roman philosophers from Aristotle to Cicero observed that republican systems rested on middle-class citizens who contributed a stability that could not be supplied by the top or the bottom of the social order.

Yet, as Hanson writes, these deeply-held ideals gradually eroded in those ancient polities, much as they are eroding in America today, and for some of the same reasons. "I am not a Greek or an Athenian but a citizen of the world," said Diogenes in the 4th century B.C. in an expression of universal citizenship that many accepted at the time and one that parallels statements made by some American elites in recent years. Rome later extended citizenship to all residents of the empire without regard to language, culture, or ethnic attachments, and Roman elites began to conduct business and political affairs on the same universal basis throughout the empire. In time, as Hanson points out, Rome came to depend upon multiracial and multicultural legions to guard the borders of the empire, evidence that the erosion of citizenship contributed to the disintegration of the Roman polity and eventually to the invasions that brought down the empire.

Hanson cites this history as a cautionary tale for Americans who, he argues, are in danger of following a path similar to Greece and Rome's. The American Founders developed their vision of citizenship out of the original templates supplied by those ancient regimes, albeit with a greater emphasis on rights than duties. As in those regimes, the modern ideal of citizenship has passed through a sequence of interpretations, with the rights of citizenship steadily expanding beyond male property owners to include workers, women, the poor and unpropertied, as well as religious and racial groups previously excluded from active participation in the political order. We have at length reached a point where many academics, journalists, and public officials wonder why citizenship should be limited at all. The events of 2020, including the coronavirus and associated lockdowns, riots and demonstrations in several cities, and a divisive presidential campaign, have further provoked a sense of crisis and decline. As Hanson sees this large problem, the campaign to extend citizenship to everyone is moving along step-by-step with the claim that there is nothing inherently valuable in the ideal of citizenship. For a mix of reasons, Americans are in danger of losing what it means to be citizens in a free republic.

Chapter by chapter, he documents how this is happening, who is responsible, and what it means for the American future. The attacks on citizenship come from many directions: some are innocent or naïve, others malevolent, still others the result of large movements abroad in the world. Many

Americans have lost their sense of what citizenship means, owing to the collapse of civic education in the schools plus an unfortunate preoccupation with consumerism at the expense of citizenship. From the top, ideologues, academics, and bureaucrats question why American citizens should enjoy rights or benefits denied to others. Like Diogenes, they think that citizenship should be abolished or universalized. Meanwhile, globalization and the movement of immigrants from the Third World have further eroded the ideal of American citizenship by importing the wider world's problems to our own shores. "What arrogantly began as an Americanization of the globe," Hanson writes, "has ended up as a globalization of America."

Social scientists and historians have observed that extremist ideologies like socialism and fascism have never made headway in the United States due to the influence of an independent middle class. Thomas Jefferson's yeoman farmer and the middle-class citizen were the opposite of the subservient peasants in feudal and other premodern systems. Yet, as Hanson reminds us, middle-class Americans have lost economic clout in recent decades as good jobs have been sent abroad, manufacturing has been outsourced, and immigrants have arrived to underbid them for scarce positions. Increasingly, they are in debt, own little or no property, work in unstable jobs, live from paycheck to paycheck, and rely on government benefits. The middle class, or what is left of it, is turning into a new American peasantry that cannot serve as the anchor of the republic. This is the new "road to serfdom," Hanson's variation on the path outlined by Friedrich Hayek in his classic work of that title.

Going hand in hand with this, he argues, is the ongoing demographic experiment that allows outsiders to enter the country illegally and thus to live here as residents in violation of national laws. Of course, national leaders have generally chosen not to enforce those laws, thereby encouraging more migration and turning immigration laws into a joke. Why should anyone follow the legal process of immigration, which may take months or years, when they can walk across the border to get the same result? Official estimates put the number of such migrants now living in the United States at around 12 million, but unofficial estimates peg it at 20 million or more, with newcomers arriving by the day. As more arrive, there is a tendency in some quarters to normalize the situation by "defining citizenship down," to rework the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's phrase, by extending citizens' rights and legal protection to residents or migrants who are not citizens and not presently eligible to become citizens. In December the New York City council passed an ordinance giving some 800,000 city residents who are not citizens the right to vote in municipal elections. As citizenship is devalued and diluted, and as national leaders turn a blind eye to immigration laws, Americans naturally wonder what, if anything, they can do to reverse the situation.

The division of the country into racial and ethnic tribes has further eroded the ideals of citizenship by emphasizing group loyalties over loyalty to the nation and the Constitution, turning government programs into a vast spoils system allocating benefits to designated groups. These divisions, moreover, never came about due to laws passed by Congress but rather by court judgments and bureaucratic interpretations of law which citizens never authorized, never supported, and are powerless to reverse. Tribalization, via affirmative action, quotas, and "diversity," lays waste to a host of American ideals: equality under the law; the principle that rights belong to individuals and not to groups; and the assumption that voters should exercise some control over state and national policy. Voters have repeatedly rejected racial preferences in state referenda, even in blue California, but public officials and university bureaucrats have found ways to circumvent those electoral decisions. Theodore Roosevelt warned about the dangers of tribalization: "The one absolutely certain way of bringing this nation to ruin, of preventing all possibility of it continuing to be a nation at all, would be to permit it to become a tangle of squabbling nationalities." Yet here we are, as Hanson observes, a country divided into squabbling groups, with some seeking advantages at the expense of others—indeed, at the expense of the nation itself.

Hanson sees the election of Donald Trump in 2016 as the event that turned the debate over citizenship from an abstract controversy into a heated national issue. "It is almost impossible," he writes, "to separate any discussion of the decline of citizenship from the political fights of the 2016–2021 period." Trump's surprisingly successful campaign in 2016, along with the steps he took as president, targeted all the issues and problems Hanson explicates: the decline of the middle class, unfettered immigration, identity politics, international trade and "globalism," and bureaucratic privilege. He wanted to "drain the swamp," close the border, and "Make America Great Again." In the process Trump encountered unprecedented opposition from the press, the permanent government in Washington, open borders advocates, and globalists. One bureaucrat said that he did not think the president should be able to change the course of American foreign policy. Adversaries called Trump a racist, demagogue, xenophobe, isolationist, and much more. Trump tried to change the course of national policy—and might have succeeded in a second term had it not been for the intervention of the coronavirus.

Hanson is cautiously optimistic about the future, though it is hard to see why in view of the distressing inquest he has delivered in this book. He points to Trump's election in 2016 and the network of issues he promoted, along with the 74 million votes he received in 2020, as signs that "the dying citizen" might be revivigorated before the republic's decline is irreversible. Yet, as he points out, powerful forces are arrayed against any such revival. Trump's tenure revealed that he was up against far more than just the Democratic Party and the national press. The IRS, FBI, CIA, and the permanent government joined with Democrats in seeking to oust Trump; even leaders of the military joined the "Resistance" campaign to get rid of him. Corporate America, especially high-tech companies, cooperated by censoring Trump's messages. These interests were shocked and surprised by his victory in 2016 and vowed not to let it happen again.

Underlying the controversies about Trump and "the dying citizen" is an alarming development: the United States is unraveling as a functioning nation-state and is in the process of turning itself into something new, untried, and untested. The ideal of a nation-state is one that posits a "people" represented by a government (or governments). That ideal, which took shape in the 19th and 20th centuries as the United States advanced to become the most prosperous and powerful country in the world, is now under unprecedented pressure. Can we any longer speak of an American "people" as we did instinctively in the last century? Hanson documents how immigration, tribalism, and globalism have shattered the idea that there is any longer a coherent population that the American government is supposed to represent. Victor Davis Hanson is on the mark with his analysis of "the dying citizen"—though he might well have titled his book, "the dying nation."

James Piereson is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute.