

VOLUME XXII, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 2022

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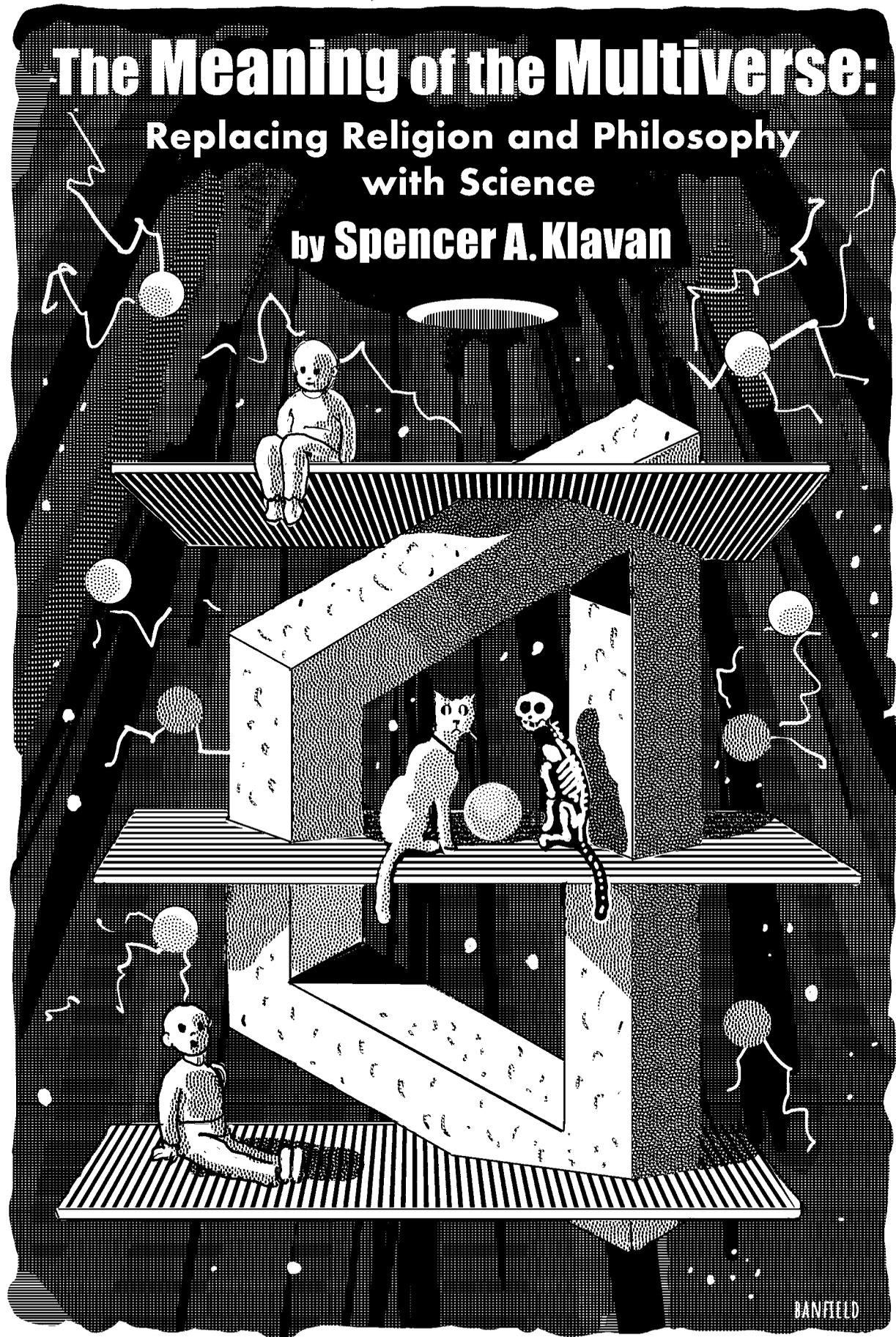
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THE DISPUTED QUESTION

Glenn Ellmers and William Voegeli on what conservatism conserves.



Hope Without Change?

by Glenn Ellmers

THOUGH HE DOES NOT USE THE WORD in his essay “The Right Now” (Spring 2022), William Voegeli accuses me of imprudence, stemming from an essay I wrote last year for the *American Mind*, “Conservatism’ Is No Longer Enough.” He seems almost incensed that I am not on board with his very definite views about good citizenship. His motto might be described as reverse Obamaism: Hope Without Change. He writes:

My Claremont colleague Glenn Ellmers wrote last year that the “basic fact” is, “*Our norms are now hopelessly corrupt and need to be destroyed*” (emphasis in the original). The “political practices, institutions, and even rhetoric governing the United States have become hostile to both liberty and virtue,” he continues. Additionally, “the mainline churches, universities, popular culture, and the corporate world are rotten to the core.” So, he asks, “What exactly are we trying to conserve?” This is how Sisyphus would explain his decision to just let the goddamned boulder roll to the bottom of the hill and stay there.

But then what? Despair generates consequences that vindicate despair....

There are two irresponsible ways to deal with the uncertainty [of our current

predicament]. One is to treat a nation’s staying power as inexhaustible, justifying the heedless pursuit of policy and lifestyle experiments. In other words, progressivism. The other is to dismiss all encouraging or ambiguous evidence to conclude that the nation is already ruined. In other words, late stage Trumpism. Ellmers writes that because the “Constitution no longer works” and “there is almost nothing left to conserve,” it is time to give up on conservatism and accept that what we really “need is a counter-revolution.”

Voegeli infers that my low opinion of our current institutions translates to a rejection of the founders’ principles. Then in failing to provide what he thinks I’m obligated to provide—namely, new principles that improve on the ideas of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison—he thinks I “show an indecent disrespect for the opinions of mankind” and “vindicate fears that the counterrevolutionaries are no less enthused about chaos and averse to clarity about ultimate objectives than the revolutionaries they war against.” At least I *think* that’s what he’s saying. I have read the essay several times, but I confess to being somewhat confused by Voegeli’s concluding sections.

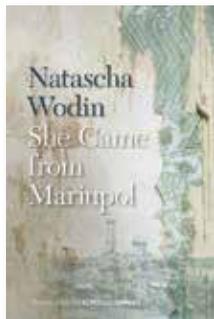
Although the principles of the American Founding represent permanent truths about human nature and justice, another permanent fact of human nature is the constant danger of tyranny. The American Revolution defeated King George III; it did not defeat mankind’s

lust for power. Nor could it guarantee that the American experiment in self-government would last forever. Now and always, liars and despots may sometimes prevail. And the habits of ordered freedom are demanding. Thus, the truths proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence are not contingent on the success or failure of the particular institutions the framers established 250 years ago. They were clear that the health of the regime had to be maintained by constant effort and even occasional alterations to their framework, which is why they provided for the constitutional amendment process. Simply because my essay argued that our current institutions, practices, and traditions have become badly degraded does not in any way mean that I reject the *principles* of the framers’ social compact theory. If I am given to despair on any point, it is over the failure of intelligent readers to grasp this basic distinction, which my essay makes repeatedly and emphatically.

IN FACT, NOTWITHSTANDING VOEGELI’S alarm, there’s nothing especially novel about my argument for counterrevolution. Political mobilization against real or alleged enemies of republicanism, and rhetoric about “the revolution betrayed” have been staples of American history from the beginning. Almost every great controversy in our history has turned on whether the United States squandered the founders’ legacy. Abraham Lincoln observed in the 1850s that Americans were no longer the men their fathers were. So, one

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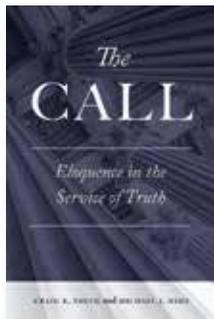
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has to wonder why Voegeli is so dismissive and even angry about my analysis.

It seems to me that his near-obsession with conserving the status quo—no matter how bad things are—blinds him to a massive problem: maintaining the current regime means defending both the current *practice* of administrative tyranny, as well as the theoretical or rational *legitimacy* of our progressive elites. And because he does not see this, Voegeli cannot understand what is most significant about Donald Trump.

Voegeli argues that “sustaining a republic based on America’s founding principles would have been difficult, and always will be.” This is certainly true in one sense, but it’s crucial to see what exactly he means by this. He writes:

The problem that modern liberal democracy *generates for itself*, as Alexis de Tocqueville argued, is that its animating commitment to equality recognizes no limiting principle. Every breakthrough erasing a longstanding disparity moves a new item to the top of the egalitarian agenda. Some inequality, previously ignored or regarded as unproblematic, comes to be designated an intolerable inequity that must now be rectified... Liberal democracy *imperils itself*, and complicates the work of those determined to conserve it, when its unrelenting egalitarianism weakens the foundations on which its viability depends. [Emphasis added.]

THAT STATEMENT PERFECTLY CAPTURES the problem of equating the American regime—which is a product of practical statesmanship—with an abstract idea of liberal democracy. Earlier in his career Charles Kesler, the *CRB*’s editor, made the astute and still valid observation that America is not just another chapter in the *History of Political Philosophy*. Kesler’s reference was to a famous textbook edited by Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey, which illuminates Strauss’s argument that modern philosophy contains an inherent logic pointing toward radical skepticism or nihilism. But Strauss himself was careful to distinguish this theoretical tendency from the world of practical politics.

This is particularly relevant because the error Kesler refutes goes to the heart of the dispute between so-called Eastern Straussians and their opponents on the West Coast—the students of Harry V. Jaffa gathered around the Claremont Institute.

Voegeli clearly dislikes the woke ideologues and writes elegantly about their bullying imposition of smelly little orthodoxies. His Sisyphean conservatism, however, seems to consist

in nothing more than maintaining permanent trench warfare between Left and Right. My arguments for rejecting our current institutions as corrupt and proposing a counterrevolution appall and offend him because he thinks they upset the relative stability of eternal stalemate—which is the best one can really expect from politics. Voegeli’s monotone historicism doesn’t even have the advantage of variety: it’s just the *same* “goddamned boulder” century after dreary century. Now that’s depressing.

Yet his argument is actually *worse* than that. Because according to his own narrative, it is the Left that should, by all rights, win the war of attrition. They are on the side of radical egalitarianism—the seeds of which were planted in the founding because they are planted in liberal democracy, and therefore in modernity itself. The progressives are correct, according to his argument, in their belief that history is on their side: radical egalitarianism truly is the regime’s endpoint. So Voegeli’s circular conservatism is revealed to be not only pointless but irrational, since only a fool would oppose what is historically inevitable.

I might go so far as to suggest that it is Voegeli who has yielded to despair, as well as passivity. Consider carefully the necessary implications of what he says in this statement:

[T]he modern conservative mission has become a dilemma: how do those who cherish liberal democracy—who see no decent, feasible alternative to it—conserve that sociopolitical order from its own self-destructive tendencies? What is to be done when the unfolding of liberal democracy’s logic undermines institutions, practices, and dispositions necessary to liberal democracy’s survival?

Because he mistakes the American regime for a theoretical construct, Voegeli falls into the historicist error of seeing its fate as preordained. What else can it mean to speak of America’s “own self-destructive tendencies” resulting from “the unfolding of liberal democracy’s logic”? This is why he never answers his own question of what is to be done. The only answer, according to his premises, is that nothing can be done. It is he, not I, who is driven to hopelessness because, whether he realizes it or not, his argument points to a denial of human freedom.

IN 1985, A YOUNG CHARLES KESLER published a critique of George Will (Voegeli’s guide in “The Right Now” for understanding American conservatism) in *National Review*. Let me conclude by quoting what a spirited Kesler wrote almost four decades ago.



Kesler notes that Will's book *Statecraft as Soulcraft* (1983), and the Eastern Straussians generally, contend "that the American regime—the constituent ideas and institutions of American politics—is radically defective" in just the way Voegeli suggests. In all the long years since then, Harry Jaffa and his students have been battling this misinterpretation, with mixed success. Like a weed, this dogma is not easily extirpated.

What, Kesler asked in 1985, would be the long-term effect of this malicious error?

It may be difficult to see now, but I believe the result will be increasingly to demoralize America, to debunk its principles and dethrone its heroes. Not as Charles Beard and the Progressive historians tried to do, by showing that the Fathers were moved by greed rather than public spirit; but, perhaps more perniciously, by asserting that the Founding Fathers did not know what moved them, because they did not quite understand what they were doing. Which is the equivalent of saying that they were not free themselves, but were in fact determined in their actions and thoughts by forces or causes extrinsic to them....

But if American conservatives seek to summon "the better angels of our nature," we must first study, and speak to, our nature. If we do not, the unhappy result will be a conservatism that can never truly be American, and an America that can never truly be conservative.

If I read him correctly, Kesler's conclusion proposes a hypothetical, but not an impossibility. Is it conceivable that, nearly four decades later, something approaching this lamentable state has now come to pass? At the very least, I think the CRB editors owe it to their readers, and to themselves, to give this question more serious and more thoughtful consideration.

Glenn Ellmers is a senior fellow with the Claremont Institute and the author of The Soul of Politics: Harry V. Jaffa and the Fight for America (Encounter Books).

Victories to Be Won

by William Voegeli

MY FRIEND GLENN ELLMERS IS "CONFUSED" by the argument I made in "The Right Now." I'll restate my position and misgivings about his *American*

Mind essay "'Conservatism' Is No Longer Enough."

American conservatives take seriously the founding's principles, one of which is that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. The minimally democratic interpretation of this self-evident truth is that a government's powers are legitimized by the governed consenting to it once, when a nation is founded. Thereafter, in this view, a government need never again seek popular approval in order to be just.

If we agree instead that *ongoing* consent must be conferred through regular popular elections, then conservatives are obliged to engage in democratic politics. This work entails contesting elections, formulating proposals calibrated to secure majority support, and appealing to voters with rhetoric that they understand and respect. Such labors require would-be governors to accommodate popular preferences and sensibilities, even those of doubtful merit. Compromises necessitated by the correlation of political forces do not guarantee victories, but even the ones they do make possible often feel partial and provisional. And the work never ends: it is rare in politics to resolve controversies permanently, even ones that concern principles valid in all times and places.

The problem, as Winston Churchill said, is that all the alternative forms of government are even worse than democracy. So, the challenge is to win elections, enact policies, and build coalitions. As I read "'Conservatism' Is No Longer Enough," Ellmers believes that the political situation in 21st-century America has deteriorated to the point that these basic political activities are no longer realistic or honorable. He says at the essay's outset that "most people living in the United States today—certainly more than half—are not Americans in any meaningful sense of the term." Real Americans, he makes clear, are those who voted for Donald Trump and against Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election. Those who voted the opposite way are "citizen-aliens" who "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."

ACCORDING TO THE FINAL TABULATION, Biden received 81.3 million votes, 51.3% of the total, and Trump won 74.2 million, or 46.9%. The official numbers also show that Biden secured his Electoral College victory by narrowly winning five states—Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—in which Trump prevailed in 2016 when he ran against Hillary

Clinton. Since Election Day, however, Trump and many of his supporters have maintained that these vote totals are the bogus product of a corrupt, fraudulent election process, rendering Joe Biden's victory and resulting presidency illegitimate.

What is most striking about Ellmers's argument is that it renders the 2020 Democratic victory illegitimate even if one stipulates that all the votes were counted accurately and scrupulously. The U.S., he says, "has become two nations occupying the same country": the more numerous "non-American Americans" who voted for Biden, and the somewhat smaller group of American Americans who voted against him. Under this theory, Trump voters need not suspect that the 2020 election was stolen to resent and reject the outcome. Instead, they have every right to believe that Biden's victory was an act of aggression by the anti-American majority against the true American minority.

Majoritarianism is an element of democracy but not the entirety. The questions of who votes and about what are also crucial. Ukraine would be crazy to accept an offer from Russia to conclude its war on terms determined by a comprehensive, binational plebiscite. Since there are 40 million Ukrainians and 145 million Russians, this travesty would be a surrender of the weak to the strong rather than a genuine expression of consent.

Ellmers invites the pro-Trump minority of real Americans to draw the same conclusion about their situation vis-à-vis the anti-Trump, faux-American majority. If two increasingly antagonistic nations occupy the same country, then majority rule is nothing more than a vehicle by which the bigger nation subjugates the smaller. Real Americans who engage in democratic politics, attempting to placate and entice enough non-American Americans to win an election now and again, are validating rather than resisting their oppressors' authority.

THE WORD "REVOLUTION" IS USED LOOSELY. Advertisers, for example, extoll revolutionary haircare and home-cleaning products. It's hard to figure out what, exactly, Ellmers has in mind when he says that "revolutionary medicine" is required for "the disease afflicting the nation." If we take him seriously *and* literally, however, his intentions do not sound modest. Ultimately, he says, patriots must accept that "America, as an identity or political movement, might need to carry on without the United States."

The founding principles do indeed sanction revolution: when a government becomes destructive of the ends for which it was created, the people have a right to alter or even abol-



ish it. But revolution is a last resort: prudence dictates that long-established governments should not be changed for light, transient causes. When it is not necessary to revolt, in other words, it is necessary not to revolt.

The question of when or whether a revolution is justified is, then, not so much philosophical but empirical. It depends on the most astute possible assessment of all the relevant facts. Though I can't prove he's wrong, I strongly suspect that Ellmers's diagnosis of America's political condition is too apocalyptic, mostly because it overgeneralizes about the Americans who voted against Donald Trump in 2020.

The hardest thing for political scientists to remember is that very few voters know or care as much about politics as do the experts in universities and think tanks. This presents a paradox: a thorough, subtle understanding of American politics requires discerning the rough-and-ready political opinions of people who lack the time, inclination, or capacity to attend closely to public affairs. A 2016 survey, for example, found that only 26% of American adults could name all three branches of the federal government, and 31% could not name *any* of the three.

UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES, IT IS highly unlikely that more than a small subset of the 81 million Biden voters endorse the worldview of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Nikole Hannah-Jones, Ibram X. Kendi, or the Oberlin College Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. The Occam's Razor interpretation of 2020 is that it demonstrated less about intersectional theory's purchase on the electorate than it did about voters' inclination to reject incumbents when the country is beset by problems, such as a pandemic and racial unrest. It only makes things worse if, amidst these troubles, a sitting president achieves personal unpopularity by routinely acting like a jerk.

In 2022 the country is afflicted with different problems—inflation and crime chief

among them—leaving Joe Biden less popular in his 18th month in office than Donald Trump was at the same point four years ago. You would not expect this result if Biden's 2020 constituency were so resolute and distinct as to be a nation apart from the one that preferred giving Trump a second term. Nor would we expect that one of the Democrats' most prescient electoral analysts, David Shor, would predict that the likeliest culmination of the political trends begun under President Biden is the election of a Republican president and Congress in 2024, with the GOP winning a filibuster-proof Senate majority of 60 votes. Nor, finally, can Ellmers's theory of the case account for the increasing GOP share of the Hispanic vote. This rolling realignment of a major voting bloc is inexplicable if we are two nations occupying the same country.

It makes perfect sense, however, if we are watching a majority, held in restraint by constitutional checks and limitations, change easily with deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments. This, Abraham Lincoln said in his First Inaugural, "is the only true sovereign of a free people." In the weeks since *CRB* published "The Right Now," the Supreme Court has: 1) held that a state legislature may not regulate gun ownership in disregard of the Second Amendment; 2) rebuked the Environmental Protection Agency for asserting legislative powers that the Constitution grants solely to Congress; and 3) overturned the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, which greatly constrained the people's ability, acting through their elected representatives, to regulate abortion.

The policy consequences of these rulings are less significant than the political import: the dogged pursuit of quotidian democratic politics remains worthwhile, not futile. Conservatives are better advised to keep playing the game than to overturn the board. This is especially true because what happens *after* you overturn the board is both nebulous and ominous. In that inaugural address Lincoln spoke

of two sections of the country—one believing slavery wrong, the other right: "Physically speaking, we cannot separate." The physical separation of today's non-American Americans from the American Americans would be infinitely more difficult. And even if the Disunited States of America could somehow yield two separate countries occupied by two distinct nations, a great many common questions would remain to be addressed between them. The idea that they would be better resolved through the international politics of treaties than the intranational politics of laws is highly unlikely.

IN SHORT, I FIND GLENN ELLMERS'S PESSIMISM about a United States where "there is almost nothing left to conserve" and the "Constitution no longer works" overstated. Abundant reasons remain to believe that ordinary politics remains sensible and honorable. That engagement does not require, as he says in his reply, a "near-obsession with conserving the status quo." It needs only the recognition that conservatives are better served by working through the medium of representative democracy than by pursuing any un- or anti-democratic alternative.

Conservatives should not despair, should not give up, and should not abandon political persuasion in favor of counterrevolution. There are victories to be won, and they'll be won by doing the ordinary, mundane work of democracy: securing power by offering candidates and policies that electoral majorities judge likely to effect the people's safety and happiness. To deny these possibilities misreads the present situation, and worse, turns possible victories into certain defeats with gratuitously provocative rhetoric about non-American Americans. No small number of those fellow citizens, *if* taken seriously, and approached shrewdly, might support conservative policies and candidates.

William Voegeli is senior editor of the Claremont Review of Books.

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