VOLUME XXIII, NUMBER 1, WINTER 2022/23

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A Publication of the Claremont Institute

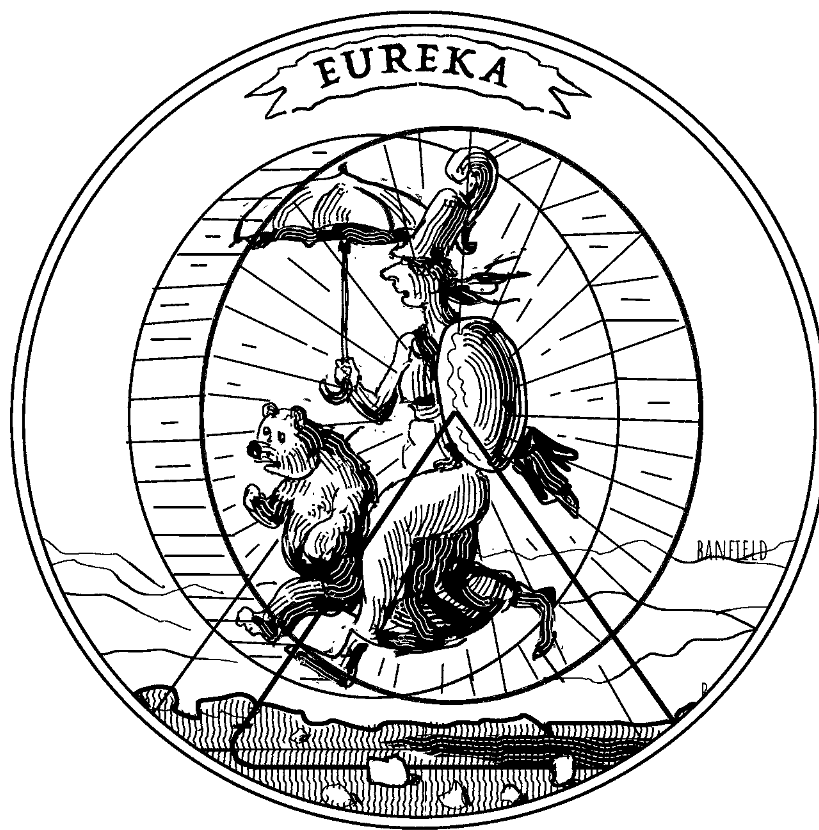
PRICE: $9.95

IN CANADA: $14.95

Essay by William Voegeli

All the Lawns Are Brown

Crisis politics and the California drought.



“Ain’t that something?” says the coroner in the 1974 movie *Chinatown*. “Middle of a drought, the water commissioner drowns—only in L.A.” When nine “atmospheric river events” during the three weeks after Christmas 2022 brought California nearly as much precipitation as the state receives in an average year, no government officials lost their lives. But more than 20 residents perished, and the property damage from flooding exceeded $1 billion. Yet no sooner did the skies clear than authorities began reminding California residents that it remained imperative to “conserve water and make conservation a way of life.” “California is experiencing—coincidentally—both a drought emergency and a flood emergency,” said the Department of Water Resources director. Only in CA.

When a state is afflicted by too little water and too much water, simultaneously, one might suppose that the whole point of *having* a Department of Water Resources is to turn this coincidence into a happy one. California officials cannot protest that the challenge took them by surprise. *Chinatown*, set in the 1930s, dramatized how securing the benefits water bestows while mitigating the harms it inflicts has shaped California’s history. In *Golden Dreams: California in an Age of Abundance, 1950–1963* (2009), historian Kevin Starr wrote that California “invented itself through water.” The Gold Rush saw men grow rich by devising ingenious means for moving water “to, through, or across land.” That technology was later modified to create irrigation systems that, by the end of the 19th century, turned California into an agricultural state. Subsequent elaborations, dams and aqueducts in particular, “metropolitanized Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area in the early decades of the twentieth century.”

Later, in the middle of that century, federal and state officials were successful and sometimes audacious in addressing California’s water needs. The Central Valley Project, approved in 1933, linked the northern Sacramento Valley region, where two thirds of the state’s precipitation falls, to the San Joaquin Valley, where two thirds of the state’s irrigable land is located. The project connected them by building 20 dams and reservoirs, eleven hydroelectric powerplants, and 500 miles of canals and tunnels. In 1960, spurred by Democratic governor Pat Brown, California launched the even more extensive State Water Project, described by Starr as “the most ambitious water storage and distribution system in the history of the human race.” Its 21 dams and 705 miles of canals deliver water collected in northern California to 27 million residents and 750,000 acres of farmland.

The State Water Project system remains unfinished. Since the 1970s there has been more litigating and planning than building, despite the fact that California’s population doubled between 1970 and 2020. Two recent books—*Winning the Water Wars* (2020) by journalist Steven Greenhut and *The Abundance Choice: Our Fight for More Water in California* (2022) by Edward Ring of the California Policy Center—argue that the cycle of droughts and floods owes less to capricious nature than to failed governance. The “core problem,” writes Greenhut, is that California policy has come to emphasize “boosting fish populations” over meeting residents’ and farmers’ needs. Indeed, it has come to *favor* water scarcity as “a means to limit growth and force changes in the way we live.” He believes that the key component of

a successful policy is expanding water storage throughout the state, both above and below the earth's surface, so that rainfall and snowmelt is preserved for future use, rather than draining into the Pacific Ocean or overflowing riverbanks.

Beyond that, Greenhut calls for an "all of the above" approach to making water available and directing it to its most pressing needs. For both writers, "all of the above" includes—as a component rather than the entirety of a solution—desalinating ocean water. (California has an 840-mile coastline, America's longest after Alaska and Florida.) They point to Israel, with less than one fourth of California's population and located in one of the world's driest regions, which has five desalination plants and is on track to get 90% of its water from the Mediterranean Sea.

California presently has twelve desalination plants in operation but, despite constant warnings that the latest drought is the worst in state—if not human—history, has been notably ambivalent about adding more. In May 2022 the California Coastal Commission voted 11-0 to reject a new plant in Orange County that would have provided 50 million gallons of water a day, enough to provide for 460,000 residents' needs. As Edward Ring noted in *National Review*, the Poseidon Water company had, over a 24-year period, spent $100 million on the application for the plant. Much of that time and money, he notes, produced "seemingly endless studies and redesigns as the Coastal Commission and other agencies continued to change the requirements." Despite these efforts, and the fact that Poseidon had been operating a similar desalination plant in neighboring San Diego County since 2015, the commission's board followed its staff's recommendation: to reject the project for economic and environmental reasons. One audience member at the hearing wore a green hat and carried a sign that read, "I am a plankton, please do not kill me!"

Learned Fecklessness

Californians, directed to make conservation a way of life, may fairly ask why responsiveness and competency cannot be made a way of government. According to a 2019 fact sheet on "Water Value in California" published by the Public Policy Institute of California, the state's residents have already grown increasingly efficient about using water. A mere 10% of California's water consumption is "urban," i.e., for residences and businesses. For those purposes, Californians in 1990 consumed 231 gallons per day, per person, a figure that fell to 180 gallons in 2010 and 146 in 2015. Another 40% is devoted to agriculture, which is also getting more bang for the bucket. As a result of conservation and planting less thirsty crops, "[f]arm production generated 38% more gross state product in 2015 than in 1980, even though farm water use was about 14% lower." The remaining 50% of water use is "environmental": rivers protected as "wild and scenic" under law, water used to maintain habitat within streams or to support wetlands within wildlife preserves, and water needed to maintain water quality for farms and homes.

Books mentioned in this essay:

Golden Dreams: California in an Age of Abundance, 1950–1963, by Kevin Starr. Oxford University Press, 576 pages, $24.95 (paper)

Winning the Water Wars: California Can Meet Its Water Needs by Promoting Abundance Rather than Managing Scarcity, by Steven Greenhut. Pacific Research Institute, 385 pages, $29.99 (paper)

The Abundance Choice: Our Fight for More Water in California, by Edward Ring. Amazon Digital Services, 225 pages, $17.95 (paper)

Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy, by Robert H. Wiebe. University of Chicago Press, 332 pages, $33 (paper)

Liberal Equality, by Amy Gutmann. Cambridge University Press, 332 pages, $34.99 (paper)

Between the World and Me, by Ta-Nehisi Coates One World, 176 pages, $26

Road to Survival, by William Vogt. William Sloane Associates, Inc., 356 pages, out-of-print

The simplest explanation for the Golden State's water policy failures is that they are just one more instance of the learned fecklessness that has beset California's public sector. A state that once amazed the world with its freeways and bridges has now wasted 15 years and $10 billion building a high-speed rail system that, according to its original directors, may never carry a single passenger. The more money the state, counties, and cities spend to prevent homeless people from sleeping on sidewalks and in parks, the worse the problem gets. There appears to be no public responsibility so basic, down to thwarting shoplifters and reckless drivers, that California government hasn't lost the ability or will to discharge it.

And yet, there's more to the story than ineptitude. "I'll believe it's a crisis when the people who keep telling me it's a crisis start acting like it's a crisis," is the phrase coined by law professor and Instapundit blogger Glenn Reynolds. He and others who wield it often zero in on the disconnect between public figures' rhetoric and their private actions. Former vice president Al Gore, for example, is the most prominent global-warming Cassandra but also the owner of a 10,000-square-foot Nashville home that uses 34 times as much electricity as the average American residence. The electricity required to heat just its outdoor swimming pool exceeds the amount six typical households consume for all purposes.

Hypocrisy is not the worst of it, though. The more fundamental inconsistency that deserves our scorn is when crisis mongers' warnings do not match their *public* actions. Citizens, in other words, have every right to complain if the people who keep telling us it's a crisis preside over a government response that, instead of being focused and urgent, is incremental, diffuse, irresolute, and languid. In 2018 69% of Los Angeles County voters approved Measure W, a ballot proposition to raise property taxes for the purpose of improving facilities that capture and treat water. With nearly 10 million residents, a population more than one fourth of California's, and exceeding that of all but the ten most populous states, L.A. County does not have the luxury of failing in slight and inconsequential ways. Yet the *Los Angeles Times* found that, as of March 2022, the county had collected $556 million as a result of the ballot proposition but disbursed only $95.5 million of the new revenues. And, given that "actual construction had lagged well behind the money disbursed…it could take half a century to complete the work." One former county official told the paper, "Part of the problem is that we don't have a plan and we are saying to voters give us the money and we will figure it out later."

The payoff from the increased taxes will not only arrive in a more distant future than the voters were led to expect but will take a very different form. In particular, the *Times* reported, "Storm capture projects appear to

be a low priority." Discerning newspaper readers will infer that Measure W had the key elements of a bait-and-switch scam. Votes were secured on the promise of addressing the public's greatest concern: drought relief through enhanced rainfall and snowmelt capture. But the wording revealed, to the handful of voters who worked through it, that W's revenues would be available for a range of water-related purposes, and that the priorities would ultimately reflect officials' preferences rather than the public's. "[W]hatever voters thought," the *Times* concludes, "new water resources are not the main focus of the Measure W process."

Never Let a Crisis Go to Waste

This disingenuous approach to crisis management is neither new nor unique to California. In 1910 the philosopher William James lamented that, throughout history, "war has been the only force that can discipline a whole community." He looked forward, though, to a time when the "moral equivalent of war" will "inflame the civic temper as past history has inflamed the military temper." All that is needed to attain "that higher social plane…of service and cooperation" is "skillful propagandism" and "opinion-making men seizing historic opportunities."

Franklin Roosevelt's response to the Great Depression followed this template. If Congress failed to pass legislation necessary to meet the crisis, FDR warned in his First Inaugural Address, he would ask it for "broad Executive power to wage war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe." In Roosevelt's interpretation of his electoral mandate, the people wanted "direct, vigorous action. They have asked for discipline and direction under leadership."

In 1977 Jimmy Carter appropriated William James's phrase directly when, in a national address during his presidency's third month, he said that "the greatest challenge that our country will face during our lifetime"—the energy crisis—was the "moral equivalent of war." The alternative to enacting his energy proposals, Carter warned, "may be a national catastrophe." In his notorious "malaise speech" two years later—one of the strangest addresses in presidential history—Carter subsumed the energy crisis, along with Congress's and the people's failure to take most of the steps he had called for, under a more fundamental "crisis of confidence," manifested in "the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation." He expressed the hope that solving the energy crisis would alleviate the spiritual one: "It can rekindle our sense of unity, our confidence in the future, and give our nation and all of us individually a new sense of purpose." Carter's defeat in November 1980 is the best evidence that he never effected the societal discipline James and Roosevelt had called for, in large measure because he was no match for FDR in the realm of "skillful propagandism."

The most unguarded explication of crisis politics came from Rahm Emanuel during an interview in November 2008, days after President-elect Barack Obama had announced that the Illinois congressman would become chief of staff for his new administration: "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste." Why not? Because, Emanuel explained, a crisis presents "an opportunity to do things that you think you could not do before." He cited the energy crisis that had gotten the best of Carter as an example of such squandering: America "missed the opportunity" to enact ambitious measures by settling on an energy policy that "came down to cheap oil."

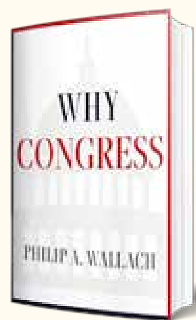
The least charitable interpretation of Rahm's Law is that it directs politicians to exploit a crisis by taking advantage of the people's fear and confusion to implement measures that opponents would ordinarily thwart. The Democratic Party, of course, wants the government to do many things it is not now doing, while Republicans think the federal government's present workload already exceeds its capabilities and legitimate authority. It makes sense, then, that Republicans heard Emanuel urging Democrats to treat a crisis like the financial one in 2008 as a *pretext* to enact policies that would otherwise be non-starters, including ones tenuously related to the crisis they purport

New and Noteworthy Books from AEI Scholars

Why Congress

Philip A. Wallach

May 2023
Publisher: Oxford University Press



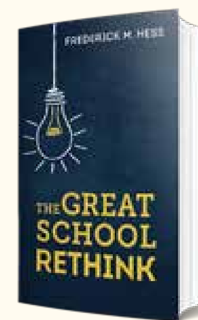
Like it or not, our country's future depends on Congress. The Founding Fathers made a representative, deliberative legislature the indispensable pillar of the American constitutional system, giving it more power and responsibility than any other branch of government. Yet today, contempt for Congress is nearly universal.

Why Congress is a bold defense of our nation's legislature and its ability to work through the country's deepest divisions and a stark warning of what our political future holds if we allow Congress to decay.

The Great School Rethink

Frederick M. Hess

June 2023
Publisher: Harvard Education Press



The pandemic exacerbated longtime frailties in American schooling—and opportunities to do better. In this volume, Frederick M. Hess, an astute observer of school improvement, shows how our frustrations are a product of routines that no longer make sense. His response isn't about grand "reinvention" but to help readers explore how they might rethink their schools.

Brimming with thought-provoking ideas and exercises, this book is a must-read for school leaders, educators, and anyone passionate about the future of American education.

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to address. After all, Emmanuel went on to list Obama agenda items that were clearly germane to the financial crisis, such as fiscal, tax, and regulatory policy—but also said that 2008 had opened the door for the new administration's bold initiatives in health care, energy, and education.

An alternative interpretation, probably closer to Emanuel's own understanding, is that a politician who lets a crisis go to waste is like a physician whose remedies alleviate the patient's symptoms but do nothing to cure the underlying disease. Cheap oil, in this view, addressed the most obvious manifestation of the energy crisis: gasoline that was expensive and sometimes unavailable. But if you believe that the energy crisis was really about America achieving self-sufficiency through the development of domestic energy sources cleaner and more secure than OPEC imports, then a steep decline in the global price of oil was a setback. Once beleaguered consumers concluded that the crisis was over, they lost interest in more fundamental changes.

Even if one stipulates that Democrats are acting in good faith when they make sure that a crisis doesn't go to waste, there are complications. One is strictly governmental: justifying an ambitious agenda on the basis of a crisis is only as valid as the diagnosis of the crisis is accurate. If, in fact, the problem to be addressed is not particularly grave, and can be resolved by limited reforms rather than comprehensive ones, "letting a crisis go to waste" is a hyperbolic way to deplore *solving* it. Thus, the difficulty for Emanuel's argument is that, despite enacting very few of the energy policies that Jimmy Carter had said were imperative, the nation ended up suffering very little of the devastation that Carter had said was imminent.

Crisis and Democracy

Ideally, government leaders would perfectly assess *every* challenge facing the nation, neither understating nor overstating its dangers. In a republic, where officials who are not philosopher-kings derive their power from the consent of the governed, the problem is not just governmental but political. The range of politically feasible policy options—what has come to be called the "Overton Window"—is determined by what the public will reject and accept. These impermanent boundaries can be shifted by new facts, such as cars queueing up around gas stations in the 1970s or the collapse of the Lehman Brothers investment bank in 2008, but also by rhetoric—opinion-making, as William James called it. Precisely because a crisis affords elected leaders the latitude to do things that they could not do before, they are strongly tempted to sound the crisis alarm every time they are stymied by political opposition or inertia.

It is a tactic that carries dangers, for the politician and the country. The people may experience crisis fatigue, either because they doubt that the situation really is as dire as they have been told, or because they suspect that the decision-makers, reluctant to surrender their power to do things that they couldn't do before, are refusing to give an all-clear signal when it becomes warranted by changing circumstances. Jimmy Carter's declining approval ratings during his four-year term reflected, in part, the self-inflicted credibility problem he created with overwrought claims that the energy crisis was a clear and present danger to the nation's existence.

The broader threat, implied by FDR's First Inaugural, is that crisis politics may lead to saving democracy, or at least claiming to save it, by curtailing or suspending democracy. It, too, is a seduction that could become an addiction. In 2010 *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman made the unfortunate choice to think out loud on NBC's *Meet the Press* about how, if America "could just be China for a day," we "could actually…authorize the right solutions…on everything from the economy to [the] environment." He hastened to add that he didn't really want America to become China, not even "for a second." What he wanted, rather, was for our democracy to "work with the same authority, focus and stick-to-itiveness" as an authoritarian government, rather than continue to be one that never generates anything besides "sub-optimal solutions."

Political theorist Matthew Crawford reminds us that the widely held belief that liberalism and democracy are good things can lead us to forget that they are distinct things, ones that can be difficult to reconcile. As it was originally understood, liberalism embodied the idea that the state's purpose, to secure people's inalienable rights, required government to be limited in its aims and claims. For more than a century now, this original version has retreated in the face of a more expansively conceived liberalism that calls on activist government to secure people's well-being. Liberalism, in this understanding, requires social welfare programs, income redistribution, and extensive regulations.

Liberals of the second type were optimistic that democracy would give their project practical support and moral validation. Everybody loves Santa Claus, so a government committed to devising more ways to give more things to more people should enjoy ever increasing popularity. "We will spend and spend, and tax and tax, and elect and elect," is the formula attributed to New Dealer Harry Hopkins. Further, activist government was not only upheld by democracy but, in turn, upheld democracy. As Franklin Roosevelt often said, "Necessitous men are not free men." The loss of "economic security and independence" brought on by the Great Depression was, in Roosevelt's interpretation, *the* cause for the rise of the fascism that had plunged the world into war. "People who are hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made."

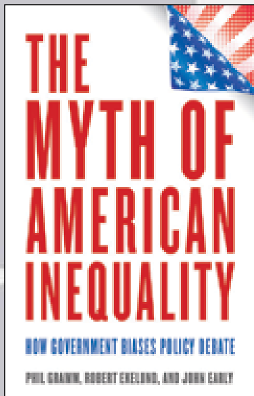
The Liberal-Democracy Hyphen

The post-New Deal era's disappointments and frustrations made it increasingly important, but also increasingly difficult, for Democrats to "strengthen the hyphen in 'liberal-democracy,'" to quote Crawford, writing for the online journal *UnHerd*. The elect-and-elect formula becomes unreliable when taxes rise, as they did during the unlegislated bracket-creep increases of the 1970s. At the same time, government spending was prodigious but ineffectual, as Great Society programs failed to deliver their promised transformations.

It also gets harder to win elections when the activist state acquires a public image that is less like Santa Claus and more like Nurse Ratched: patiently, insistently, incessantly telling you to fasten your seatbelt, drive 55, remove your shoes before going through airport security, don't use plastic straws, step out of the bar and stand on the sidewalk if you insist on smoking, wear your mask, get vaccines and boosters, lower your thermostat, replace your gas stoves, and water your lawn no more than once a week and for no more than ten minutes at a time. These interventions left many Americans feeling that liberalism's supply of discipline and direction greatly exceeded the demand for it. As journalist Josh Barro warned liberals in 2017 in *Business Insider*, "All this scolding—this messaging that you should feel guilty about aspects of your life that you didn't think were anyone else's business—leads to a weird outcome when you go to vote in November."

The malaise speech can be read as a garbled attempt to strengthen the liberal-democracy hyphen. Carter had campaigned in 1976 as a populist, promising America "a government as good as its people." There was, then, a tortured consistency in choosing to explain his administration's setbacks as a consequence

POLICY, VALUES, AND BEYOND



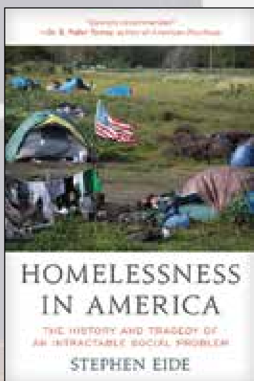
The Myth of American Inequality

How Government Biases Policy Debate

By Phil Gramm; Robert Ekelund and John Early

"Demonstrates that the nation's condition is much better than it is portrayed by numbers misused to advance political agendas. Thanks to Gramm's mind-opening book, facts—you remember them: they used to appear in political debates—might make a comeback." **—George F. Will**

"In this slim volume the former senator and his two distinguished coauthors undo the cozy myth of unfairness, lay their academic opponents flat, and unveil the shining potential America offers for all. Lucid, bold, and transformative."**— Amity Shlaes, author, *Great Society* and *The Forgotten Man***

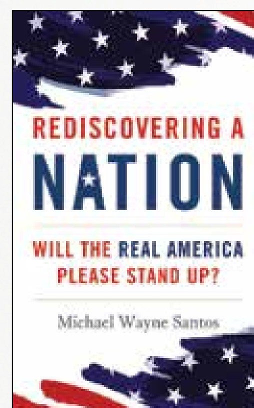


Homelessness in America

The History and Tragedy of an Intractable Social Problem

By Stephen Eide

"Stephen Eide has brought a fresh approach to a stale and seemingly endless problem. . . Strongly recommended, especially for those who think there is a single solution to these problems."**— E. Fuller Torrey, MD, author of *American Psychosis: How the Federal Government Destroyed the Mental Illness Treatment System***

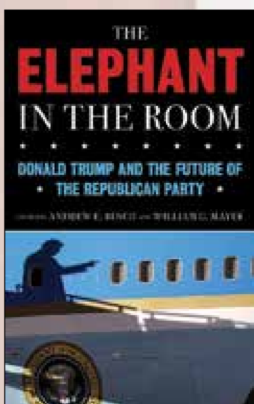


Rediscovering a Nation

Will the Real America Please Stand Up?

By Michael Wayne Santos

"In *Rediscovering a Nation,* Michael Wayne Santos reintroduces us to the national character that we all need to rediscover before it is too late."**— Michael Austin, University of Evansville, and author of *We Must Not Be Enemies: Restoring America's Civic Tradition***

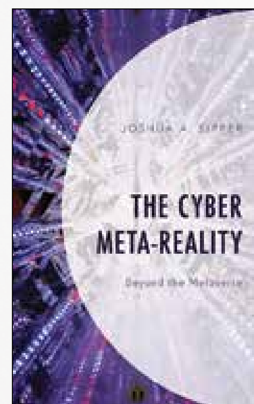


The Elephant in the Room

Donald Trump and the Future of the Republican Party

Edited by Andrew E. Busch and William G. Mayer

In this collection of timely essays, a variety of center-right political scientists and commentators address Donald J. Trump's past effects and future role in the Republican Party. Covering policy, politics, character, and comportment, the authors offer a wide range of analyses and recommendations.



The Cyber-Meta Reality

Beyond the Metaverse

By Joshua A. Sipper

Recently featured on the Gingrich 360 podcast

"Joshua Sipper leverages his years of expertise and his brilliance to write *The Cyber Meta-Reality* . . . Highly recommended to inquisitive scientists, cybersecurity professionals, social scientists, philosophers, and space enthusiasts alike."**— Diane M. Janosek, Capitol Technology University**

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of the American people being screwed up in ways Carter had not previously realized.

More sophisticated attempts to reconcile activist government with democracy were advanced by brigades of intellectuals in the late 20th century. Their argument was that even as progressive theorists at the beginning of the 20th century had made the happy discovery that liberalism not only permitted but required activist government, subsequent deliberations had also revealed that democracy, rightly understood, mandated the very same thing. In *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy* (1995), historian Robert H. Wiebe chronicles how theorists had come to favor "true," "genuine," or "real" democracy over the mere democracy of representation and accountability. He cites as one example *Liberal Equality* (1980) by political scientist Amy Gutmann, who argued that "universal welfare rights and a relatively equal distribution of income," along with many other entitlements, were not policy goals but preconditions of political legitimacy. In such a framework, Wiebe says, "governments are largely administrative, and elections ritual."

Stolen-Base Politics

In the 21st century, the tension between the Democrats and the *demos* has grown so acute as to have become a crisis of its own. Eighty-year-old Joe Biden has described himself as a "bridge" to his party's rising generation. But the younger activists working in and on the party bring from their training on radicalized college campuses a vocabulary and viewpoint that baffle and offend more voters than they attract. A 2021 Pew Research Center poll found that Democratic respondents under the age of 30 were the only group where a majority (55%) preferred the idea that other countries are better than the U.S. to the alternatives that America is either the best or one of the best nations in the world. Overall, 23% of all respondents called America the greatest country in the world, compared to 5% of under-30 Democrats.

What is true in general of a cohort defined by age and party affiliation applies particularly to the "opinion-making men" (and women, and nonbinaries) in politics, journalism, academia, and non-profits who are the avatars of 21st-century liberalism. For them, it's not just that the U.S. is not the best country but that it, and Western civilization more broadly, is singularly bad: racist, misogynistic, and rapacious. The idea is not new, but its progress from the fringes of leftist thinking toward the core of the Democratic Party is. It was in 1967 that literary critic Susan Sontag argued in *Partisan Review* that America, a nation "founded on a genocide," had become "the culmination of Western white civilization." The problem, as she saw it, is that

> [t]he white race *is* the cancer of human history; it is the white race and it alone—its ideologies and inventions—which eradicates autonomous civilizations wherever it spreads, which has upset the ecological balance of the planet, which now threatens the very existence of life itself.

Even in the turmoil of 1967, driven by war in Vietnam and race riots in big cities, this opinion was considered outré. But by 2015, when a *New York Times* critic hailed *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates as "essential, like water or air," the Sontag thesis had achieved wider currency. Coates made the same link in his book between America's crimes against humanity and its crimes against nature. The nightmarish American Dream plunders "not just the bodies of humans but the body of the Earth itself," he wrote. The way of life that "endangers the planet" is the same one that consigns African Americans to "prisons and ghettos."

> Crisis politics may lead to saving democracy, or at least claiming to save it, by curtailing or suspending democracy.

As Crawford writes, "a shared political morality that sacralizes the victim" is the connective tissue that turns revulsion at these discrete outrages into a "shared political morality." (I am a plankton, please do not kill me!) In a 2012 *Wall Street Journal* interview, Harvey Mansfield said that progressivism began as an "alliance of experts and victims." The alliance now includes a third party. Its members are, in Crawford's words, "those with the moral sensitivity to see victimization where it may not be apparent, and who make this capacity a touchstone of their identity." The sensitive can be counted on to demand, in the name of the victims, deference to the experts. "Follow the science!" Thus characterized, those who oppose or are even dubious about the progressive agenda are necessarily stupid (insolent toward experts), wicked (callous toward victims), or both.

The day may come when strident rhetoric, modeled on Coates's and Sontag's, catalyzes a dominant electoral majority. But the toxicity of "defund the police" in the 2020 election argues that this day will not arrive soon. In the meantime, activists who share that worldview will be tempted to secure otherwise unattainable policy victories by never letting any crisis go to waste. The moral equivalent of war not only inflames the civic temper but allows the inflamed to berate uninflamed doubters as the disloyal opposition, a fifth column.

One year ago *The Atlantic*'s Ed Yong, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his work on COVID, told another journalist, Sam Adler-Bell, that he covered the pandemic from the start as "an opportunity to take stock of societal problems that have been allowed to go unaddressed for too long." Writing in *New York* magazine, Adler-Bell elaborated the point, calling COVID "an X-ray of the dysfunction and rot in our social order." It had made clear the need for "the child tax credit, universal health care, investments in schools and hospitals, and alleviating poverty." Accordingly, he said, the debates about COVID—when to end lockdowns, resume in-person public schooling, modify or drop mask requirements—"are as much about how we should *regard* all this suffering as they are about how we may prevent it."

Replying in his online newsletter, Josh Barro called this approach to keeping the pandemic crisis from going to waste a flagrant case of "stolen-base politics." Though people acquiesced in temporary departures from normal life during COVID, "[a]t no point, anywhere along the line, was there significant buy-in for the idea that we were going to permanently change the social contract." The base-stealing involved skipping the step where the public was supposed to be *persuaded* that a Green New Deal was exactly the remedy needed to fix and redeem our rotten, dysfunctional social order. Persuasion is hard and humbling, requiring you to meet voters where they are in order to move them closer to where you think they should be. Far easier to declare that, because a crisis has rendered politics a luxury we can't afford, we have no choice but to "trust the experts." It helps when the experts just happen to share your political worldview, but then hurts when the experts go on to issue contradictory directives supposedly derived from "settled science." "[M]asks at the host stand, but not at your table," Barro observes. "Or, masks, but not on the faces of public officials ordering that they be worn. Or, stay home, unless you're protesting for a cause we agree with." Such arbitrary orders "made a farce of

the idea that the rules are written and enforced by people 'following the science.'"

Ecocentrism vs. Anthropocentrism

California's drought is a difficult, pressing, complex policy challenge. As a *political* problem, though, it is best understood as a debate about how to regard California's water needs rather than about how to meet them. Some, such as Steven Greenhut and Edward Ring, have no desire to censure or dismantle the vision of the good life that defined California during its post-World War II age of abundance. In this view, smart infrastructure programs, worthy successors to Pat Brown's California Water Project, could supply all the water needed by thriving farms in the Central Valley and suburban families living in single-family homes with backyard pools and lush lawns.

The opposing environmentalist viewpoint treats California's water scarcity as a reality to be accommodated, not a problem to be solved. The drought results from "excessive and unsustainable demand for water in our state," Doug Obegi of the Natural Resources Defense Council wrote on the organization's blog. Droughts and floods, "the new normal of climate whiplash," in Obegi's words, are not only the result of global warming but nature's fitting rebuke for our abuse of the planet. Greenhut's *Winning the Water Wars* points out that in the late 1800s conservationist John Muir urged California to construct reservoirs "so that all the bounty of the mountains may be put to use." By 1992, the Sierra Club felt it necessary to reproach its founder for such a "strong anthropocentric component" in his writing, different from, and inferior to, the "ecocentric thinking" animating the modern environmentalist movement. The point when conservationism turned toward ecocentrism, and an aesthetic rejection of industrial civilization engendered a moral judgment and then a political crusade, came with ecologist William Vogt's bestselling *Road to Survival* (1948). "Our forefathers [were] one of the most destructive groups of human beings that have ever raped the earth," it thundered. "They moved into one of the richest treasure houses ever opened to man, and in a few decades turned millions of acres of it into a shambles."

It is likely, even in heavily Democratic California, that the anthropocentric, all-of-the-above agenda of water abundance is more popular than the ecocentric ideal of perpetuating scarcity as a way to gradually supplant modern civilization with austerity. But, to rework a maxim ascribed to Stalin, how the people vote is less important than how their votes are interpreted, implemented, and litigated.

Californians' desire for more water is clear…and hasn't made much difference. California has not increased its reservoir capacity since 1980. County and state referenda to increase the water supply serve other purposes but take years, or decades, to further the voters' main goal. The years, millions of dollars, and uncertain outcome of running the environmental-impact maze not only defeat some projects that would increase the water supply, but serve as an example that prevents many other prospective innovators from taking the first steps. Backstopping all these impediments is the constant threat and frequent reality of lawsuits by environmental groups that prolong water-abundance projects' construction, increase their costs, and reduce the number completed or even attempted. "Because the Earth Needs a Good Lawyer," is the motto of one environmental group, Earth Justice, but describes the *modus operandi* of the burgeoning environmentalist industry.

This determination to work the system, to turn political defeats into policy victories, is unfair but not unprincipled. From the environmentalist perspective, democracy's central failing is its anthropocentrism. People vote and plankton don't. To ascend to ecocentric justice, politics must be made more bureaucratic and judicial, but less democratic. The millions of species and natural wonders cannot protect themselves against plundering humans. These victims need experts to ensure their safety. It would appear that California will not again enjoy abundant water until America reclaims robust democracy.

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