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A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

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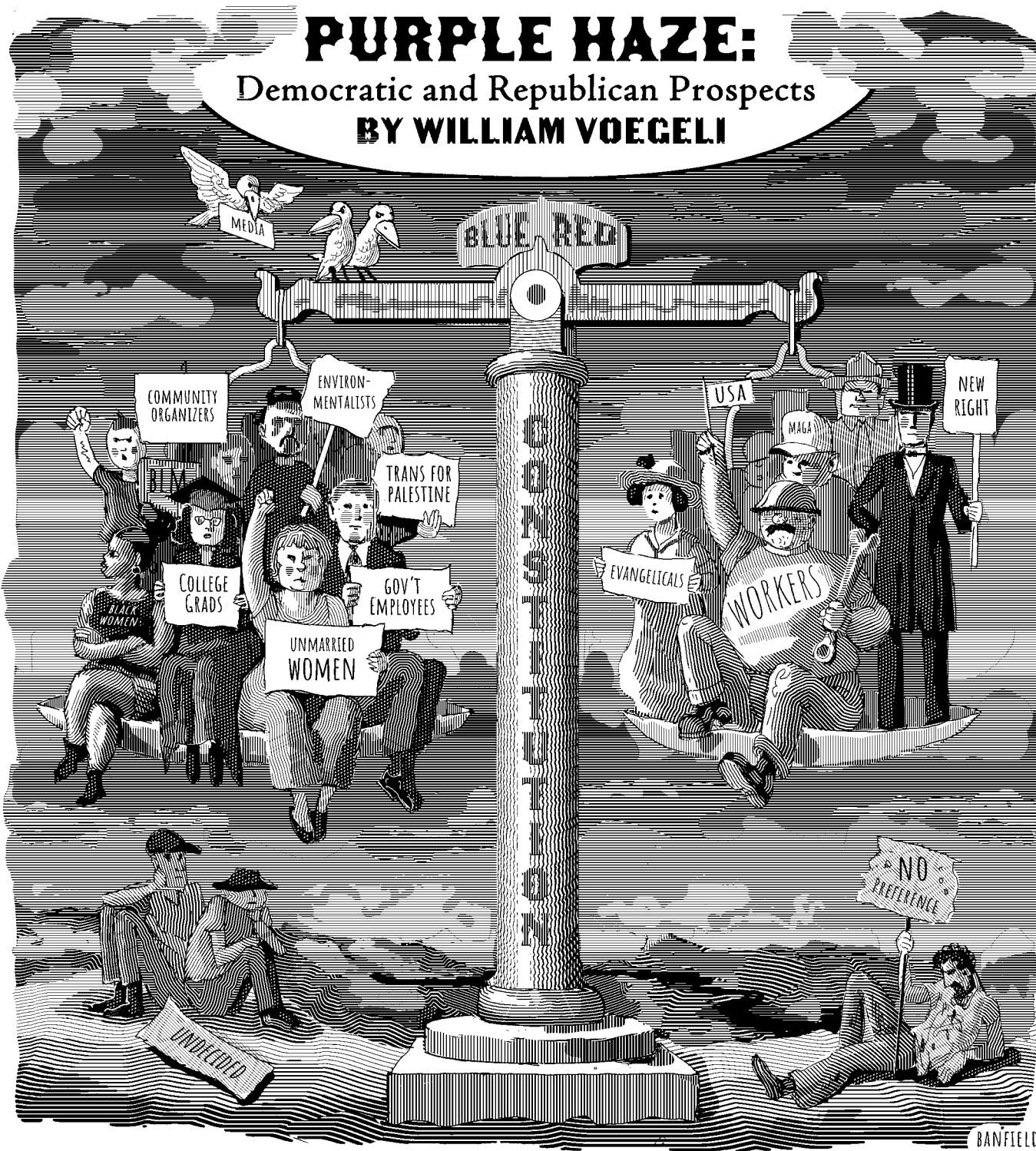
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CORRESPONDENCE

Righting the Right

I would like to thank Bradley C.S. Watson for his review of *Up from Conservatism*, the volume I edited on the New Right (“Right Angles,” Winter 2023/24). He did not, as others have done, avoid the book’s thornier essays on demographics, race, feminism, the intel state, the conservative legal movement, and immigration.

Some of his criticisms are well taken, but not all. There are, I’m sure, some critics of the country who want “nothing short of regime change,” as he writes. But such are not to be found in this book—unless “regime change” is taken to mean the displacement of the elites who run the nation’s institutions, along with the disruption or disappearance of some of those institutions.

Watson says the volume is light on solutions. It is not the final word, however, but is meant to open new avenues of thought, provide new rhetoric, and liberate the Right from the tried and failed. To see the problem clearly is half the battle. Rather than a policy book, it’s a *cri de coeur* to

galvanize this nascent movement. As often happens, the detailed policy work will come later—though many of these essays do point the way. Some vagueness also can be forgiven because had the details been worked out in full, no one except the most egg-headed would read such a book! Besides, not all problems have solutions, and some solutions cannot be said.

Watson’s major criticism—the “deepest problem,” as he puts it—is that the volume “seems to lack a firm grounding in the philosophical tradition on which it presumably means to build.” Watson is in a way correct to say that the book elevates “politics above scholarship.” It’s plainly true that this collection is not a political theory treatise. Many such treatises, of uneven quality, have already been written over the years. And many of those, in elevating scholarship well above politics, ignore not just day-to-day concerns but also civilizational concerns. The “scholarship” has avoided many questions—and when treating them, often does so in such abstract ways that either the scholarship is written only for scholars, or it allows scholars to protect themselves behind abstractions. *Up from Conservatism’s* guiding principle is the preservation of political liberty, which is fading fast right before our eyes.

Arthur Milikh
Center for the American
Way of Life
Washington, D.C.

In his review of *Up from Conservatism*, Bradley Watson claims that in my chapter I come “perilously close” to maintaining that the problem with contemporary American politics is the Declaration of Independence’s “proposition” that “all men are created equal.” Just for the record, I

would like to clarify that this is not my argument. I thought I had even taken sufficient care to avoid being perceived as coming “close” to such a claim. Thus, on my second page I acknowledge “that the political creed expressed in the Declaration of Independence is a key element of America’s national identity” and that a repudiation of the “doctrine of natural equality and natural rights” would mean that we “would no longer have the same country.” My only point was that too many on the Right have made the error of treating America’s propositional identity as its entire identity and that doing so has often undermined our ability to deliberate rationally about vital national issues such as foreign policy, trade, and immigration.

Watson also finds it “passing strange” that in making my argument I would ignore the “large corpus of Claremont scholarship” explaining how progressives have distorted the “founders’ understanding of equality.” This choice is not at all strange, however, in view of the purpose of the chapter and of the book as a whole, which is to address and correct errors of the Right. I respect and have learned from the body of scholarship to which Watson refers, but it wasn’t relevant for the task at hand: needed self-criticism of the Right if the Right is to do better in the future.

Carson Holloway
Omaha, NE

Bradley C.S. Watson replies:

My friends Arthur Milikh and Carson Holloway take me to task for misunderstanding their purposes and therefore the arguments needed to pursue them. Milikh is bothered by my observation that his volume lacks grounding in the philosophical tradition on which it presumably means to build—

that of the “Claremont school” of political science (which does not attract a passing glance in the book). He admits that the book elevates “politics above scholarship,” as he acknowledges it’s not even a policy book insofar as it operates at a high level of abstraction—something he’s quick to criticize in the “scholarship.” But to which scholarship is he referring? He owes readers an explanation. As I suggested in my review, he could start by painting a more careful picture of what he refers to as the “old Right,” which was far larger and more variegated than *Up from Conservatism* even hints. It was capacious enough, for example, to include many individuals and schools of thought that can hardly be tarred with the “establishmentarian” brush. So, the “New Right” might not need to be quite as comprehensively liberated from the old as Milikh thinks. What’s more, if his book is neither scholarship nor policy, but simply a *cri de coeur*, it’s hardly necessary. A passionate cry that no book is likely to amplify resounded across the land in 2016, if not before. I fully agree with Milikh that our country’s, and our civilization’s, situation is dire. But if the printed word has anything to offer at this point, it’s a careful account of that situation, and some detailed prescriptions as to what we can do about it. Such a book would be part of a tradition on which a New Right could build.

I agree with Holloway that “too many on the Right have made the error of treating America’s propositional identity as its entire identity.” This is a point I made in my review and have argued for (minus the identitarian language) over many years. America is indeed grounded in both creed and culture, which the founders understood to be mutually reinforcing. The prob-

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lem is that Holloway blurs both the truth and utility of the Declaration's central claim that "all men are created equal" according to the laws of nature and nature's God. In his account, that claim comes across as merely part of an American tradition. He fails to present it as an observation about the nature of reality—which undergirds consent, provides a moral basis for the republican form, and limits republican institutions to purposes in accordance with the natural law. Holloway does not give the reader any sense of the grounding and self-limiting character of the claim—not to mention the need to understand it correctly. He instead insists, counterfactually, that "[p]ropositional-nation conservatives cannot summon much energy in defending the nation's traditional moral and religious identity because they cannot see that anything critical is at stake," and "[e]xcessive preoccupation with the Declaration's creed—equality and rights—undermines American conservatism's ability to compete electorally." Which Right is he criticizing, exactly? The only defense he offers to my suggestion that he has blurred important distinctions and elided key scholarship is his opinion that the "Declaration of

Independence is a key element of America's national identity." But this is to adopt the casual language of the Left—at least when the Left still paid lip service to America's history, before finally abandoning and condemning it entirely. Without a proper understanding of the *reasons* for the Declaration's timeless place in American history—and indeed in the history of Western civilization—a New Right will stand on the same quicksand as its enemies.

Our Civil Rights Regime

Although the silence of a wise man is always meaningful, the silence of a reviewer may or may not be. My book, *American Multiculturalism and the Anti-Discrimination Regime*, shows in detail how civil rights politics is altering modern life in a new civic education, new political psychology, new pluralism or "group politics," and, above all, in a reworking of the relationship between politics and morality—a new logic of democratic morality. All problematic, to some degree; none consistent with our liberal tradition; all fascinating to any

political scientist worth his salt. Jesse Merriam's review ("Diversity and Its Privileges," Winter 2023/24) doesn't provide any real discussion of the bulk of the book (chapters 4-11) in which these claims are developed, focusing instead on my treatment of the *law* (chapter 3).

Even here, however, my novel and distinctive account of civil rights law is buried under his view of things (idiosyncratically fixating on *Brown v. Board of Education*). I claim that "constitutional law is the worst place to look to see the meaning of the anti-discrimination revolution" and hold (like others) that the 1964 Civil Rights Act is "the crucial turning point." My interpretation focuses on explaining how civil rights politics became so punitive, penetrating, and divisive. Crucially, I make the case for Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act as the "center" of the whole. Then I assess the many radical *expansions* of Title VII: stereotypes, harassment, the hostile work environment, disparate impact, unending liability for employers, the legal requirement that employers take "preventive and corrective" measures (diversity training, disciplinary measures, etc.—all forms of privatized enforcement). I explore as well the political, moral,

and lived experience of this project of social engineering, calling attention to its defects.

Merriam's review never addresses any of this. Indeed, he says I am guilty of "turning a blind eye to the judicial decisions and statutes that created the civil rights revolution" and claims that "when discussing the Civil Rights Act of 1964...Powers offers scant criticism"—which simply does not square with the facts.

Politically, my book reflects a mixture of boldness and caution. Merriam doubts the necessity of my caution. (It might have been called for "ten years ago," he says, but not today.) Yet Merriam concedes that "civil rights laws" have "come to define the very essence of who we are as Americans." My book is written for this America, for its young (Left and Right alike), and for the future. It shows how the wisdom of our liberal forebears might be recalled in order to check the recklessness of the moral reform impulse now ascendant. It offers decent, thoughtful citizens of the anti-discrimination regime a way to see themselves in a critical and civically salutary way, providing a path to sensible reform.

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