

VOLUME XXIV, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2024

# CLAREMONT

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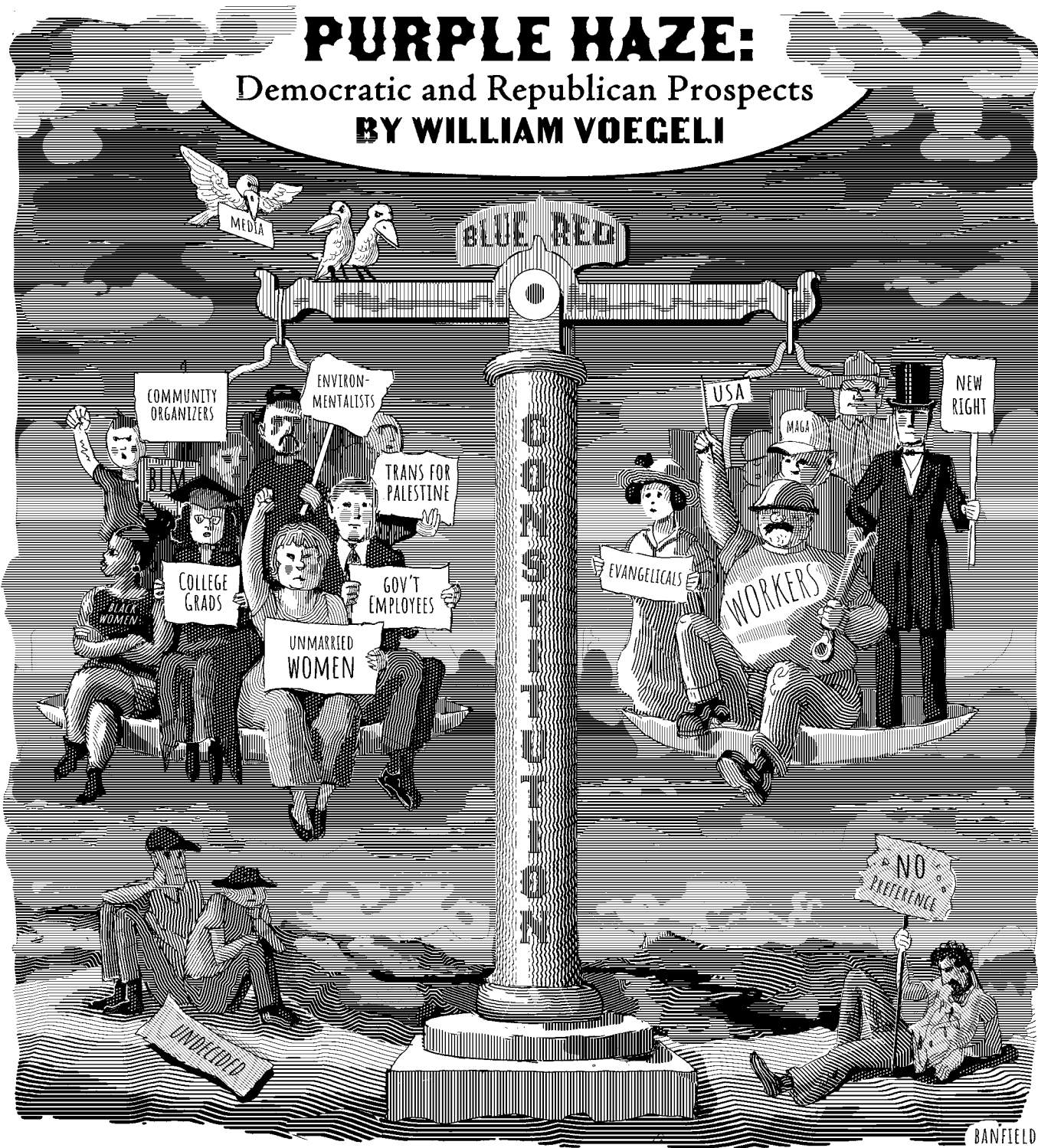
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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

# HOPE AND EXPERIENCE

by Charles R. Kesler

A SECOND MARRIAGE, SAMUEL JOHNSON FAMOUSLY REMARKED, is the triumph of hope over experience. The choice facing American voters in 2024, the choice between Joseph Biden and Donald Trump, is more like the triumph of experience over hope.

Few Americans looked forward to a rerun of the 2020 presidential race. But that, leaving aside the so-far forgettable third-party candidates, is basically what we face, though strictly speaking it will be a sequel, not a rerun.

The intervening four years have taught us that no Democrat is more popular than Biden, at least no Democrat not named Obama. Biden represents the beliefs and the tensions within his party faithfully, unimaginatively, almost robotically. The Democrats are not enthusiastic about him, but they love and trust him more than they do anyone for whom they could generate enthusiasm. Their feelings for Biden are the flip side of his advanced age. He's like an ancient tree whose trunk would show all the rings of the party's history back to Lyndon Johnson and Franklin Roosevelt. He began his recent State of the Union Address, the shouted one, by remembering FDR, who never had to shout. Biden is too old to give a fireside chat, however; he might fall asleep. To hear his soft, senescent voice shouting a speech recalls another saying of Dr. Johnson's, the one about dogs walking on their hind legs—it's not that it's done well but that it's done at all that is amazing.

Jon Stewart, the comedian who has returned to TV to provide commentary on the election, calls the 2024 campaign by the nickname "Antiques Roadshow." He is right that both candidates are old, but there the resemblance stops. Biden's frailty is the first thing most people observe about him; a sad observation, but true. Even in Washington, D.C., the city that puts the *senex* (old man) into the Senate, he appears noticeably older than everyone else. Trump too has slowed from what he was in 2020, and all the more so from 2016; as a political phenomenon, though, he remains compelling. Crowds still come out in droves to hear him. Reporters who have never understood Trump, and certainly have never wished him well say the crowds leave earlier than they used to. But one should give these reporters the credit they deserve.

TRUMP REMAINS A "PHENOM." HE DOMINATES THE AGE, POLITICALLY—the magnet in whose field of force all the other players line up, polarized for or against him, or somewhere on the verge of being for or against him. He is like Andrew Jackson or Teddy Roosevelt in that respect. He has a genius for reading the spirit of his age and becoming its emblematic figure, love him or hate him. That doesn't make him a classic statesman, but it drives his opponents crazy because, no matter what they do, they can't seem to break the imaginative hold he has on the people of his day.

And in 2024 Trump has something he never possessed in 2016 or 2020—a consistent lead over his opponent in the polls. A slim lead, to be sure, only a handful of points, but one that has held up for several months across prominent national surveys and in surveys of the battleground states. He has never had to protect a lead before. We shall see how it affects him. The weeks he has spent in various courtrooms may not be wasted after all, despite the malicious hopes of his political enemies. The courtrooms may have served as his equivalent of Biden's basement in 2020, keeping him off the regular campaign trail, with all its potential pitfalls.

Though it appears unlikely Trump will have to go straight from that lower Manhattan courthouse to the Republican National Convention that will nominate him, still, there could hardly be a more dramatic setting for his political resurrection. His opponents among the political and cultural elites have attempted ever since 2016 to dishonor and banish him—to ostracize him in the ancient Athenian manner, as too dangerous to democracy to be allowed to stand for, or stay in, office. In Trump's acceptance speech he could rise again as a political martyr, a witness to his own prosecution and persecution. What he witnessed, he may rightly say, is the degradation of our democracy by the elites who despise him because he honors the working people of this land, the so-called deplorables and irredeemables.

Small wonder that Trump's support among working-class and middle-class voters, and especially among Hispanics and young blacks who are sick of being condescended to, steadily ascends while Biden's plummets to earth. With luck, a little hope may yet emerge from the experience of 2024.

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