

VOLUME XXIV, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2024

# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

Randy E. Barnett:  
**Why I'm a Libertarian**

John McWhorter:  
**Going Colorblind**

Charles Murray:  
**Steve Sailer**

Lee Edwards:  
**The Gulag Archipelago**

Roger Kimball:  
**Reading Plutarch**

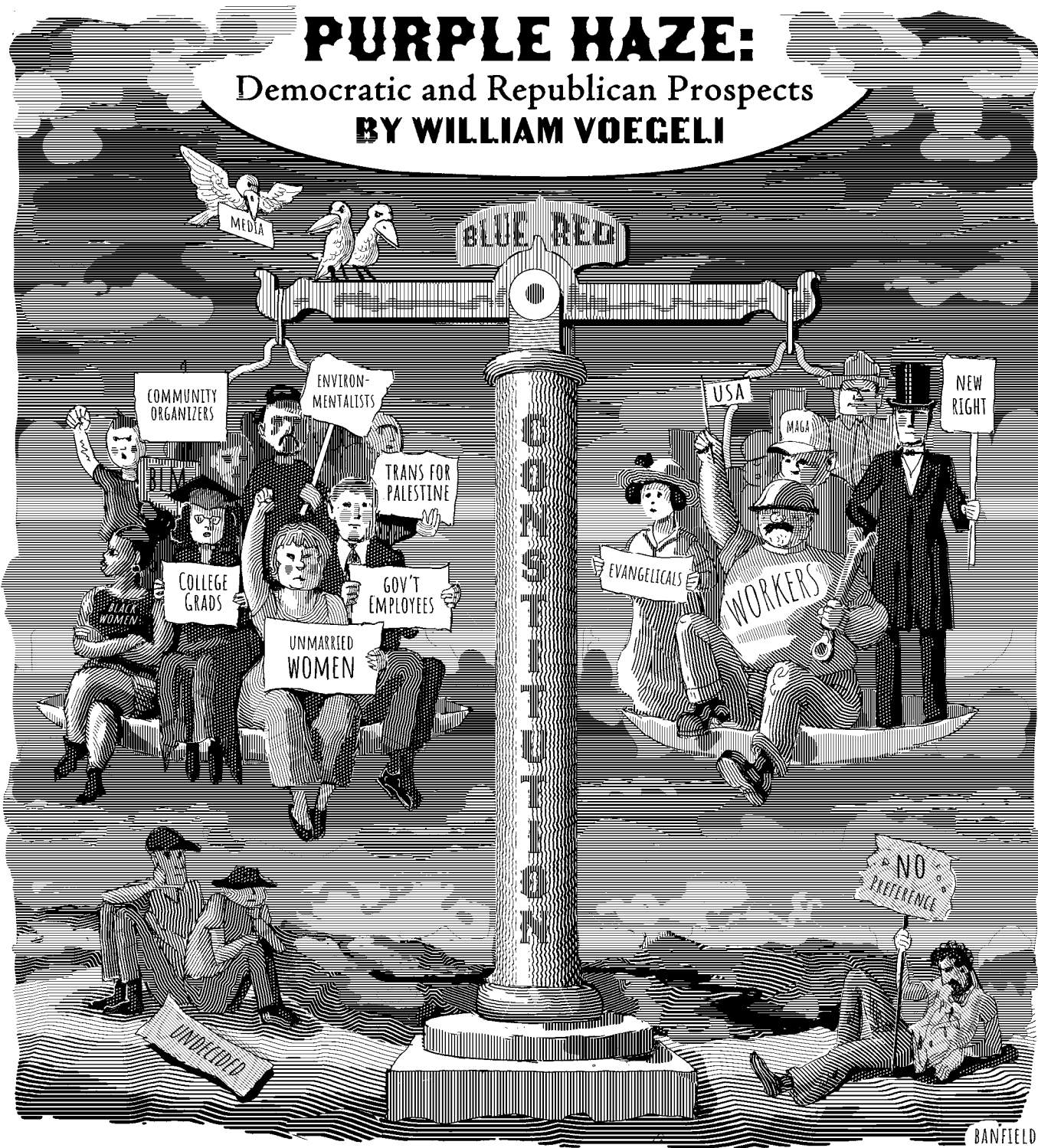
Christopher Caldwell:  
**Israel's Predicament**

Diana Schaub:  
**Allen Guelzo on Lincoln**

John O'Sullivan:  
**The New British Politics**

James Grant:  
**Inflation**

David P. Goldman:  
**The Limits of Tariffs**



## National Conservatism: A Symposium

Yoram Hazony, John Fonte, Paul Gottfried, Josh Hammer, Victor Davis Hanson, Mark Krikorian, N.S. Lyons, Daniel McCarthy, R.R. Reno, Marion Smith, and a response from Charles R. Kesler



A Publication of the Claremont Institute

PRICE: \$9.95

IN CANADA: \$14.95

---

---

PARTHIAN SHOT

by Mark Helprin



## Against Isolationism

**H**ONORING BIBLICAL SYNTAX, THE WAGES OF ISOLATIONISM is defeat: defeat on the battlefields and on the seas, of allies ill-supported or abandoned, of free markets and prosperity, of the pre-eminence of the individual, and, not impossibly, of the American experiment itself.

The world has never long been free of impassioned aggressors. The lust for conquest common to Greece, Persia, Rome, the Mongols, Arabs, Ottomans, and European empires, the Third Reich, Japan, and the Soviet Union has not disappeared but, skipping from host to host, remains a constant of history.

Now there is China—immensely powerful economically and if trends continue soon to surpass the United States in armaments. And Russia—inferior except in nuclear weapons, promiscuous nuclear doctrines, and the talent of unbridled dictators to seize the initiative. China and Russia have in their protégés North Korea and Iran—nuclear and likely-to-be-nuclear crazy states, respectively—mechanisms, similar to a fire poker, that allow the patrons to operate in the flames without being burnt.

They are all determined to conquer and rule—China with its suffocating, conformist ideology in which the individual is but an inert brick in a sick dream of static order; Russia, almost as revanchist as Germany after the First World War; North Korea, delusional, paranoid, and aggrieved; and Iran, declaring to the ostrich-blind West that it will conquer the world for Islam.

We could best deal with all this via a surge of military power in surplus, forward defenses and actions knitting American forces with those of allies, an American fleet dominant upon the oceans, a more-than-sufficient nuclear deterrent and strategic defense, and diplomacy liberated from the misapprehension that it is other than the polite expression of hard power (without which it is more or less nothing at all).

When we did conform to the above, it required, in the peacetime years 1940–2000, average defense expenditure of 5.6% GDP, which, although the Left protested reflexively, hardly starved or bankrupted America. For many years now, however, the 5.6% has been reduced to roughly 3%. That, the severe degradation of the defense industrial base, and the growing complexity of advanced weaponry have diminished American military power relative to its challenges—in my estimation, given a lifetime of obsessive tracking—to about a quarter of what it was at the end of the Cold War. This is fine with the Left and, unfortunately, as the snake eats its tail, with a growing segment of the Right in thrall to sloppy misconceptions, such as:

*We are so faulted as to have no right to defend our interests.* One can be distressed by the course America has taken, but in regard to the totalitarian dictatorships arrayed against it, exercises in equivalence can succeed only because of historical ignorance and contemporary blindness. Further, discontent or not, it is rather bad form so casually to betray or abandon one's country.

**B**Y ITS NATURE, MODERN WAR CANNOT BE DETERRED AND IS unwinnable (by us), as recent history proves. No one has laden this publication with more weight of ink than have I in criticizing American strategic incompetence in the face of asymmetrical wars from Vietnam through Afghanistan. But, properly fought, our lost wars could have been won. No law says enemies must win and we must lose. And, from time to time, we have proved this.

*Given our problems at home and on the borders, we cannot afford to look abroad.* Our domestic disintegration and decline are moral and intellectual rather than financial in origin, as we are still by far the richest major country in the world. Fixing America's problems would require choices and determination far more than all the money that has been shoveled out and devalued for half a century and to little avail. A few changes in law and \$10 billion for hiring and construction, and the borders would be subject to absolute control. A nation that believes it cannot deal with internal and external problems simultaneously is a nation that, perforce, cannot last.

*If we act with restraint, the world will leave us in peace.* No it won't. As the Biden Administration has illustrated par excellence, when we fail to respond to provocation, the world comes at us every which way. Unlike the Left, the Right in America has usually been able to distinguish between legitimate defense and gratuitous aggression, and to act accordingly. That ability is clouded, to say the least, if, whether from the left or the right, one views his country with excessive bitterness, suspicion, and impatience.

*The oceans will protect us.* This may be the origin of every strain of American isolationism. If you're harvesting wheat in Kansas it will seem (and it must have seemed even more so in the past) inconceivable that bombs bursting in Ukraine can affect you. Great distances, quiet lands, and the vast oceans have always appeared to be an impenetrable shield. And yet, when nuclear weapons, intercontinental ballistic missiles, intercontinental bombers, vessels that can carry half a million tons of freight, air bridges of immense capacity, electromagnetic pulse, cyber warfare, biological and chemical weapons, and a totally interdependent world economy did not exist, and it took a month to cross the Atlantic in tiny wooden ships, the Revolution and the War of 1812 were very closely run. In the 20th century, the Zimmerman Telegram raised the possibility of German armies in Mexico, and the Japanese—who invented modern amphibious warfare—surveyed the western coast of Mexico with invasion obviously in mind.

No nation is forever safe, there is no safety in isolation, and the argument for isolationism that its alternative is the ill-judged, disastrous use of force can be valid only if one despairs of the possibility of probative behavior, accurate determinations, self-discipline, and wise choices. Such a loss of confidence and courage would in turn and even entirely unto itself mean the stasis of civilization and its inevitable defeat. For civilization must be defended, as always, actively. And, as always, at risk.

The CLAREMONT REVIEW OF BOOKS is a publication of the CLAREMONT INSTITUTE  
FOR THE STUDY OF STATESMANSHIP AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY.

Subscribe to  
the *Claremont Review of Books*

*“The Claremont Review of Books is  
always provocative and worth  
reading, and makes a great gift  
idea for lovers of books  
and ideas.”*

*—Mollie Hemingway*

Subscribe to the CRB today and save 25%  
off the newstand price. A one-year  
subscription is only \$19.95.

To begin receiving America’s premier  
conservative book review, visit  
[claremontreviewofbooks.com](http://claremontreviewofbooks.com)  
or call (909) 981 2200.

CLAREMONT  
REVIEW OF BOOKS

P.O. Box 39,  
Claremont, CA  
91711

NON PROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE PAID  
PERMIT NO. 504  
UPLAND, CA