

VOLUME XXIV, NUMBER 2, SPRING 2024

# CLAREMONT

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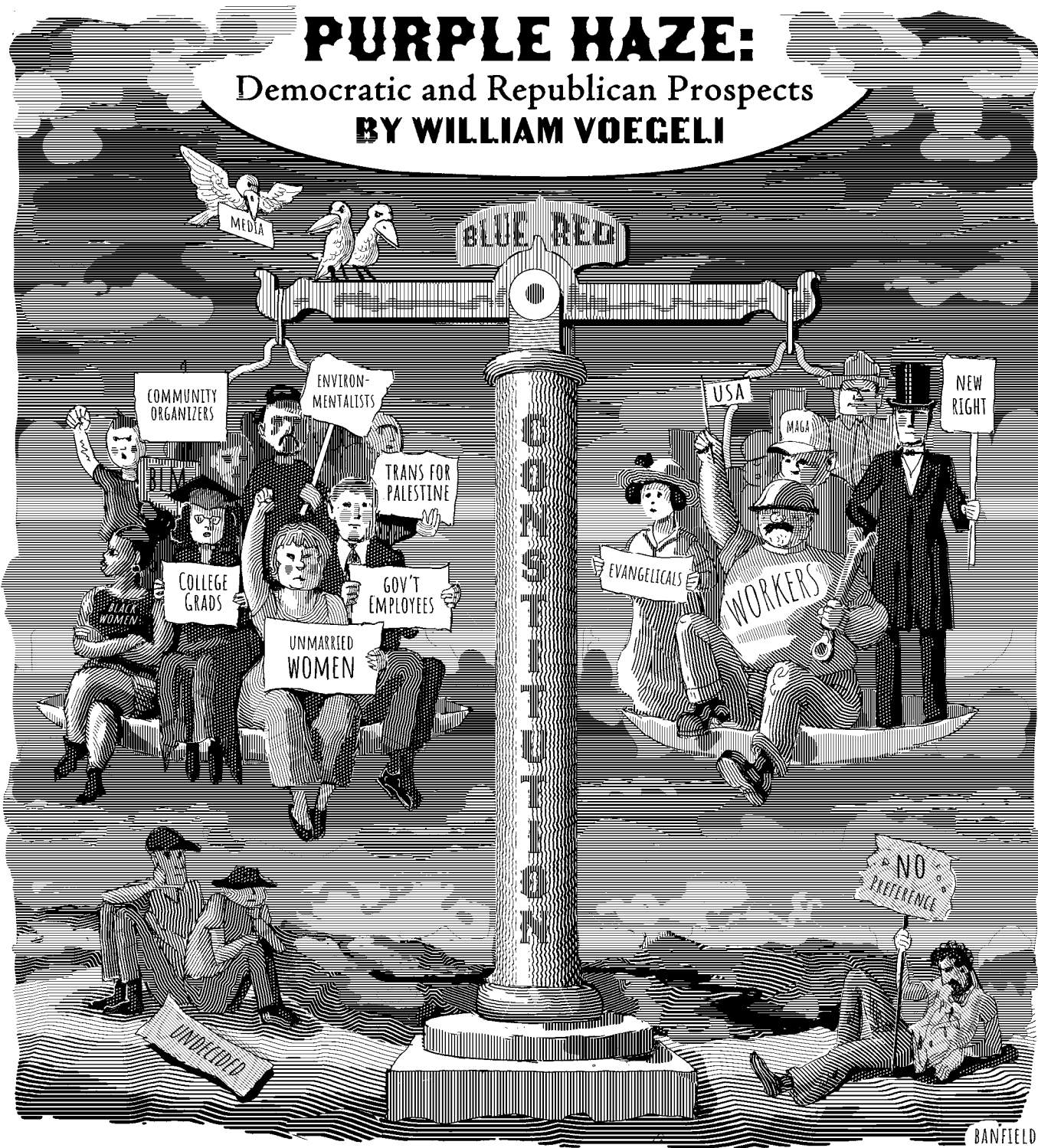
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A Publication of the Claremont Institute

PRICE: \$9.95

IN CANADA: \$14.95

Book Review by Malcom Kyeyune

# STOP THINKING ABOUT THE ROMAN EMPIRE ALREADY

*Big Caesars and Little Caesars: How They Rise and How They Fall—from Julius Caesar to Boris Johnson*, by Ferdinand Mount.  
Bloomsbury Publishing, 304 pages, \$28 (cloth), \$18 (paper)

*Why Empires Fall: Rome, America, and the Future of the West*, by Peter Heather and John Rapley.  
Yale University Press, 200 pages, \$27 (cloth), \$18 (paper)



**H**UMANS NEED NARRATIVES TO UNDERSTAND the world. This was true in antiquity, when earthquakes or floods could be interpreted as divine punishment for a society's misdeeds. It remains true now, when climate alarmists try to portray natural disasters as cosmic punishment for mankind's hubris. But these days, the supposed climate crisis is being overshadowed by another worldwide disaster, one that has become nearly impossible to ignore during the span of the Biden Administration: the Western world order is spiraling rapidly into political, economic, and military disarray. What has gone wrong? When did it go wrong? Can it be halted, and if so, how? Like any other big crisis, this one begs for a coherent narrative—a story that can help us make sense of the past and prepare for the future.

**F**ERDINAND MOUNT'S *BIG CAESARS AND LITTLE CAESARS: HOW THEY RISE AND HOW THEY FALL—from Julius Caesar to Boris Johnson* can be said to represent one popular attempt to derive meaning from today's growing chaos. It has some things to recommend it: it is acerbic, humorous, and occasionally poignant. It is, however, neither a real study of "Caesarism," nor a work of history. In truth, Mount—a British columnist who helped formulate the Tories' 1983 general election manifesto—delivers a polemic in defense of the status quo. In 2024, this cannot help feeling incredibly, fundamentally dated.

The problem at the book's core is not really new. The modern concept of "Caesarism," like that of "fascism," has been wrenched from its historical context for use as an ideological device. Fascism in the narrow sense is the name for a

specific, heterodox, and very heterogeneous political movement in interwar Italy. In a slightly broader sense, it refers to the larger panoply of micro-organizations, nationalist movements, and various cargo cults that draw ideological or aesthetic inspiration from that original movement. Yet the abstract idea denoted by the term "fascism" has expanded far beyond what these narrow factual parameters would allow. This is because World War II plays an indispensable role in the contemporary story of the world: it has become, in more senses than one, the modern West's creation myth.

As a result, the study of fascism easily morphs into a set of answers in desperate search of a question. Fascism studies become a quest for a master theory that can explain a few limited political movements as symptoms of some menacing eternal sickness. Once on a late night,



after a couple of beers, someone tried frantically to explain to me that the ancient Norse practice of *hólmanga* was in fact fascism's true origin point. Supposedly the *holmgang*, a duel between two people over slighted honor, displayed the "basic logic of fascism": that of the strong enforcing their will on the weak.

**W**OULD BENITO MUSSOLINI HAVE REMAINED an obscure journalist if some Vikings hadn't brained each other over an insult or a gambling debt, miles away and a thousand years before he was born? That is quite doubtful, but it's beside the point. The point is that invocations of fascism and Caesarism often betoken a need to read all of human history retrospectively in such a way that it can be said to culminate in the present. This is the true goal of *Big Caesars and Little Caesars*, and the author hardly bothers to conceal it. Mount treats Caesarism as a universal current of evil running through all of human civilization. Then he uses it, implausibly, to explain the rise of contemporary figures and movements whose politics he finds objectionable.

The result is a survey of history that can very generously be described as "eclectic." Mount draws a jagged but ultimately unbroken line from Julius Caesar, to Oliver Cromwell, to Adolf Hitler and Charles de Gaulle, culminating in Donald Trump and—revealing a barely hidden parochial obsession—Boris Johnson. Like the inebriated bar patron who claimed to have discovered the "true DNA of fascism," Mount offers the reader one rubric for identifying "big Caesars" and "little Caesars" alike.

Books like this basically adopt the view of a fantasy novel to describe human politics. The story begins with a timeless, ordered, and relatively stable system (in this case, liberal democracy), threatened with a rising evil from outside its borders. If only that outside threat can be defeated (if the One Ring can be thrown into Mount Doom), then the system will return to normalcy. As such, even the supposed distinction between "big" and "little" "Caesars" is just a pretense: pride of place ultimately goes to Johnson, not because he's the most consequential figure, but because he undermined Mount's immediate political interests by supporting Brexit. A figure like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán—a democratically elected politician who is generally *not* known for his firebrand orations—is a "Caesar" because he opposes current Atlanticist orthodoxy. Meanwhile the economist Mario Draghi, who spent the '80s running D.C.'s World Bank and was airdropped into Italy mid-COVID to form a technocratic government that nobody voted for, counts as a paragon of "democracy."

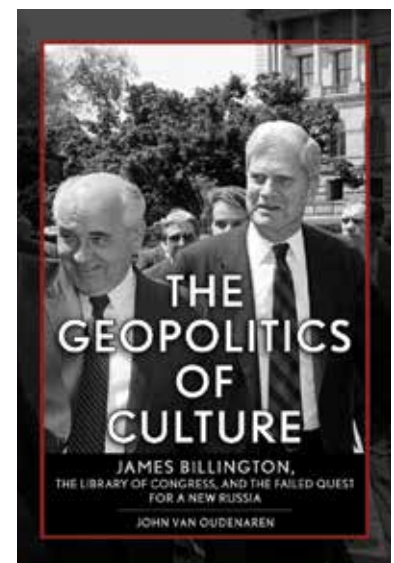
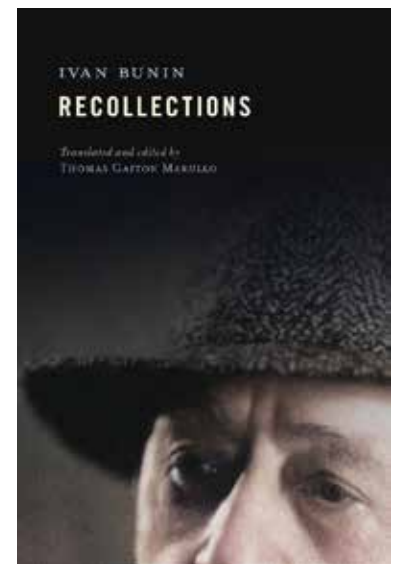
In 2024, though, the basic narrative of a liberal-democratic Shire facing up against a menacing outside threat can no longer be taken seriously. The liberal-democratic arrangement is now clearly falling apart from within. U.S. economic and military primacy is ending. The war in Ukraine is on the brink of Russian victory; Yemen's Houthi rebels have managed to blockade the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, and the U.S. Navy has proven powerless to stop their attacks. Joe Biden's ascent was supposed to represent victory for the forces of "anti-Caesarism," proof that "the adults are back in charge" of the American-led world order. But far from shoring up that world order, Biden has presided over its open disintegration. The Hobbits are actually not threatened by Dark Riders, Uruk-hai, or magic rings. The Shire is tottering under the weight of its own contradictions.

**U**NLIKE MOUNT, PETER HEATHER AND John Rapley look these problems squarely in the eye in *Why Empires Fall: Rome, America, and the Future of the West*. Heather, a professor of medieval history at New College, London, and Rapley, a skilled popular economist, attempt soberly to assess where America finds itself in the historical arc of empires, where it is headed, and what sort of future policy is best suited to preserve as much American power and prestige as possible.

As Heather and Rapley tell it, empires are born, mature, and die not because of outside forces, but because it is in the nature of human political systems—just as it is in the nature of humans themselves—to do so. The historian Polybius used the term *anacyclosis* to describe what many ancient Greek philosophers saw as the normal cycle of human government. In *anacyclosis*, the three different types of rule—by the one, the few, and the many—follow naturally from each other, as each rule eventually degenerates and gets replaced. A well-functioning monarchy degenerates over time into a tyranny, which is then replaced by an aristocracy. The aristocracy, in turn, descends into corrupt oligarchy and is overthrown by the people, forming a democracy. The democracy then devolves into chaotic mob rule, at which point a strong enough leader can grab the reins and institute a new monarchy, beginning the cycle afresh.

Though *Why Empires Fall* is obviously far more preoccupied with Rome than with ancient Greece, it is engaged in the same sort of reasoning as drives the theory of *anacyclosis*. It lays out a history of empire generally, and a history of the American empire specifically. Then it attempts to propose a plan for avoid-

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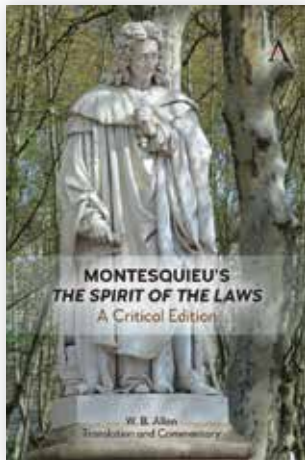
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## Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*

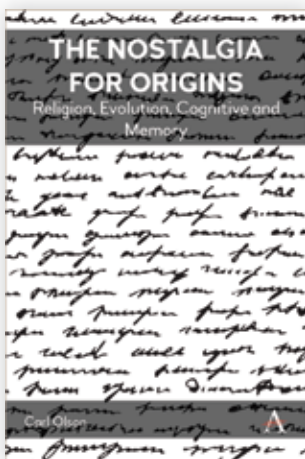
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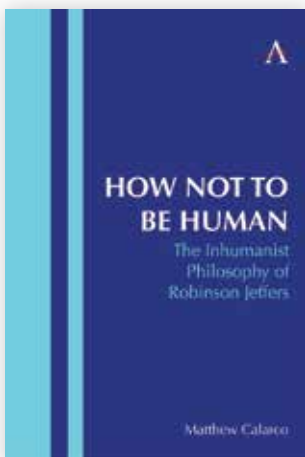
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ing the worst-case scenario, i.e., a chaotic collapse of the U.S. empire.

THE SUGGESTIONS HEATHER AND RAPLEY lay out to try to forestall such a collapse include painful but necessary reform to America's unsustainable fiscal trajectory, and a new stance on diplomacy—one that doesn't try to preserve the global primacy the U.S. enjoyed after the fall of the Soviet Union but instead accepts that change is unavoidable, and also not necessarily a bad thing. To use a term that has gotten popular of late, the authors suggest that the U.S. should try to lean into growing "multipolarity," rather than wage a futile struggle against it. With the United States already severely isolated diplomatically over the crisis in the Middle East, and the U.S.-China relationship close to collapsing into economic warfare, it's pretty clear the ship isn't going to turn around.

Though there's much to recommend in *Why Empires Fall*, the recent events already mentioned have conspired to give it a somewhat dated feel. Now that the U.S. deficit is exploding, and the time forecasted to add another \$1 trillion to the federal debt has contracted from nine months to roughly three, there is a sense here of trying to teach the sailors on the Titanic the latest tricks in iceberg dodging. The problem isn't even that Western political elites aren't willing to listen to advice; it's that even if they wanted to listen (which they do not), it's unclear that they could actually do something to change course. If that is indeed the case, then perhaps Americans will find it increasingly profitable to turn their eyes away from the Romans, toward the ancient Greeks.

In the minds of triumphant Western ideologues, one signal victory over the forces of Sauron came with the collapse of the USSR. The Greeks, however, would have looked at the last century of Russian history in a very different way. They might have said that the once-productive reign of the tsars began as a monarchy, degenerating into a tyranny. The Bolsheviks that replaced Nicholas II were a bureaucratic aristocracy (indeed, as professional revolutionaries, that was how they understood their own historical role), that then devolved into a dysfunctional oligarchy. As that oligarchy collapsed, attempts were made to create a Russian democracy, which swiftly degenerated into *ochlocracy*: Russia fell into anarchic mob rule. From that primordial soup of gangsters, oligarchs, and feuding state bureaucracies, there eventually rose a figure strong enough to consolidate power: Vladimir Putin.

Is this cycle likely to repeat itself, in one form or another, in the United States? Polybius, were he available for comment, would say it

is all but guaranteed. Shoehorning Putin into some kind of "Caesar template" makes for an awkward fit, but a case could readily be made that he was simply one of the strong men that happened to walk in when history decided to call its audition for the next phase of Russian *anacyclosis*. Similarly, the up-and-coming "Caesars" in America seem very much to defy the "rules" that supposedly characterize all Caesars according to Ferdinand Mount. Consider the standoff at the start of the year over the Southern border between the governor of Texas, Greg Abbott, and federal authorities. Abbott, invoking James Madison and the Constitution, sent in his own national guardsmen to eject federal agents, daring President Joe Biden to do anything about it. After various pundits made noises about federalizing the Texas National Guard or otherwise turning this standoff into a true constitutional crisis, the Biden Administration ended up backing down.

BY DOING WHAT HE DID, ABBOTT CLEARLY crossed a proverbial Rubicon. Should similar conflicts spring up in the future, it's not entirely clear the White House will be in charge. But Abbott is hardly some sort of natural "Caesar," nor is there any evidence he even *wants* to be one. Just as Putin is generally viewed by many Russians not as a conquering, ideological tsar but rather as a fairly boring technocrat, Abbott himself is a pretty ordinary, mainstream Republican politician. The logic of events, rather than personal desires, forced him into the role of throwing the Caesarian dice at Eagle Pass.

Indeed, the shameful little secret among Western elites today, broadly known but impossible to speak of openly, is that even the biggest villains or "Caesars"—including Boris Johnson and Donald Trump—are merely people who happened to be in the right place at the wrong time. The idea that Trump became president as the culmination of some long-held plan to reshape the world in his own image is an open farce.

In the years ahead, America will probably see its own share of "Caesars" come and go. But while someone like Ferdinand Mount would try to convince you that you can spot them from afar by the way they talk or their atrocious hair, Polybius would dismiss such foolish notions out of hand. As he might have told us, real Caesars aren't born. They are simply hewn from whatever material is found to hand.

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