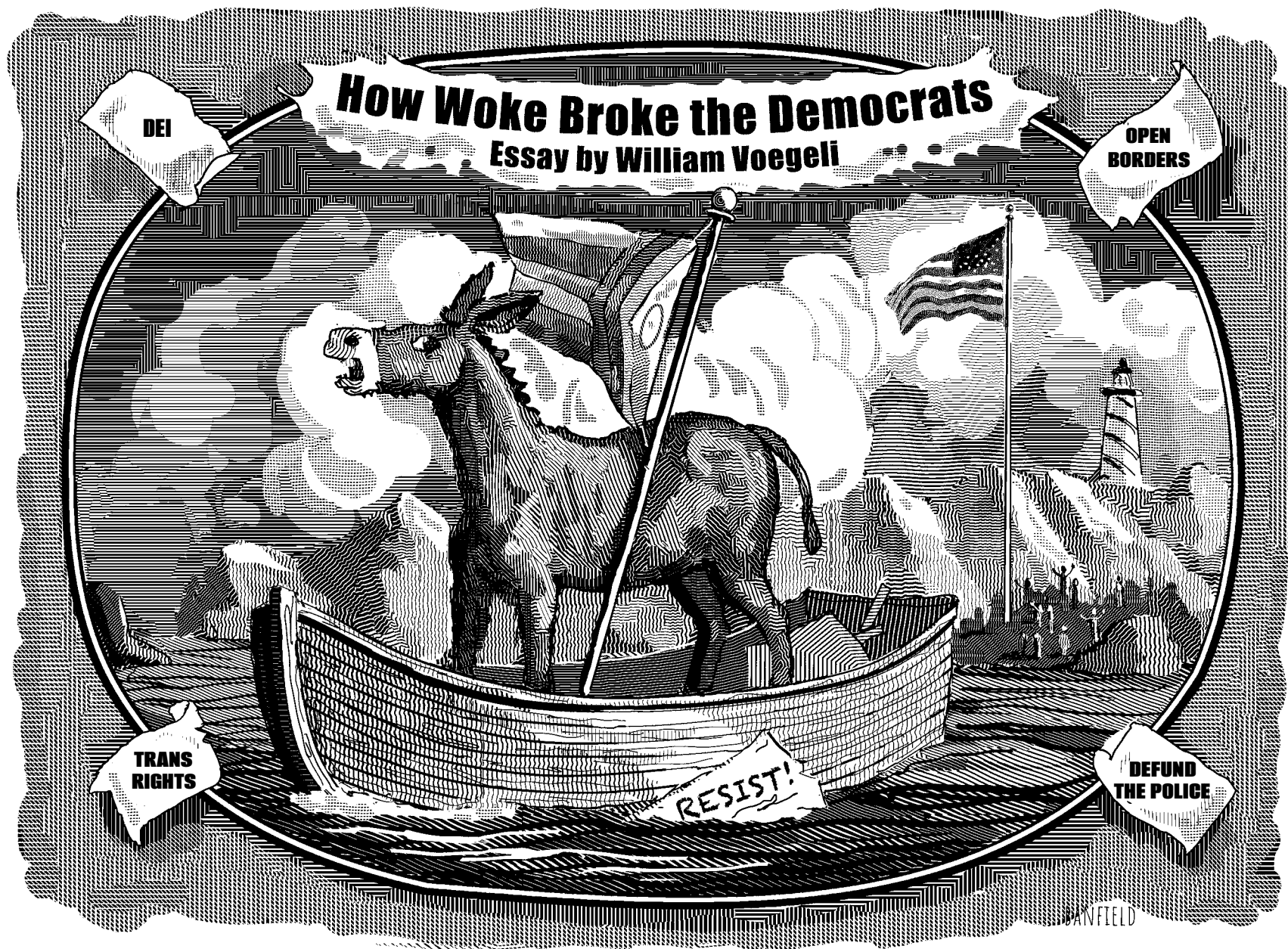


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## RECLAIMING THE CAMPUS

*Storming the Ivory Tower: How a Florida College Became Ground Zero in the Struggle to Take Back Our Campuses,*  
by Richard Corcoran. Bombardier Books, 336 pages, \$28.99

THE LIBERAL ARTS, WRITES RICHARD Corcoran in *Storming the Ivory Tower*, his account of reform and revolution as president of the New College of Florida, “are helpful in equipping humans for self-government, personally and politically.” Following the Left’s long march through the institutions, what we have in place of genuine institutions of higher education are centers of indoctrination devoted to delegitimizing the family and the American “settler state”; devaluing Western civilization’s religious, scientific, intellectual, and artistic achievements; disparaging individual creativity and initiative in favor of racial essentialism; and replacing leaders with bureaucrats whose principal and often sole mission is achieving racial quotas in hiring and promotion. These quotas are what the bureaucrats call “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion,” but as Corcoran shows, in practice DEI means political conformity, inequitable treatment of individuals, and exclusion of thoughtful dissenting views. What’s more, the DEI bureaucrats are ineffective—and remarkably uncurious about their own ineffectiveness—in educating students from the supposedly underprivileged groups for whom they profess to deliver more equitable outcomes.

Not every college and university, of course, fits this profile in its entirety—there are many campuses at which faculty and occasionally even deans, provosts, and presidents dissent from progressive orthodoxy and DEI racism, which stirs some hope that higher education can be rebuilt, as the example of New College shows. Yet almost every American college and university is administered in the progressive and DEI spirit. A key tool in the hands of such administrators, Corcoran explains, is the so-called “diversity statement,” which is used to weed out academic job candidates who will not declare allegiance to woke racial essentialism.

THE NEW COLLEGE OF FLORIDA WAS founded in 1960 as a private liberal arts college with a subsidy from the mainline Protestant United Church of Christ and faculty members that included the well-known historian (and anti-Semite and anti-Zionist) Arnold Toynbee. Gradually declining as a private college, in 1975 it was taken over by the state of Florida, initially as a liberal arts college within the University of South Florida, but since 2001 as a fully separate institution within the Florida public higher education system as its “premier honors liberal arts college.”

Twenty years later, recounts Corcoran, New College was clearly failing at recruiting students, raising money, and complying with regulatory mandates. The trumpeted and often oppressive progressive and “antiracist” climate of thought on campus was not in fact attractive to black and Hispanic students and disproportionately failed to recruit them or retain them to graduation.

Governor Ron DeSantis and the Republican-controlled legislature responded in January 2023 by offering both an infusion of funds and an infusion of spirit, including the appointment of six reform-minded trustees—a majority of the board—among them gadfly journalist Christopher Rufo, Hillsdale College’s Matthew Spalding, and *CRB* editor Charles Kesler. The trustees proceeded to elect Corcoran—the former Speaker of the Florida House of Representatives who served as DeSantis’s commissioner of education from 2019 to 2022, including through the harshest months of the COVID-19 panic—first as interim and then as permanent president of New College, with a mandate to save the school from closure by restoring it to truly liberal education. Much of *Storming the Ivory Tower* is devoted to clearing away the mainstream media lies that have clouded public and even insider perception of what Corcoran and the reform-minded trustees are trying to do at New College.

Corcoran shows what can be accomplished under the diligent, hands-on management of a determined and able leader. Because a school is a physical place, not just an idea, reform encompasses thinking through not just core curriculum, student admissions, and faculty recruitment but improving food service operations and overcoming millions of dollars of deferred maintenance on the beautiful but decaying campus. It means creating the conditions for civil debate, even about contentious and controversial issues, bringing in faculty and speakers from a variety of perspectives and teaching students to respond to arguments with arguments, not denunciations or violence. The purportedly reactionary New College under Corcoran attracts more black and Hispanic students, educates them better, and retains them to graduation at a higher rate than did the woke college Corcoran took over.

THE STORY OF NEW COLLEGE’S REBIRTH suggests that if students and parents can’t find the education they need through existing institutions, those institutions will either reform or die. The fortunate conditions under which New College’s reform-minded president and trustees have operated are to an important degree peculiar to Florida, but as Richard Corcoran’s vital book demonstrates, to understand what changes are possible in American higher education, it is helpful to consider what has been done under favorable conditions, as a model for those inside and outside the ivory tower who are doing the work of reform under less favorable ones.

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