TRUMP ERA BEGINS

Essays by Christopher Caldwell, Charles R. Kesler, and William Voegeli

Steven F. Hayward: The Threat to Liberty
Gerard V. Bradley: Keith Whitaker
Scott Yenon: This Nation, Under God?
Richard Brookhiser: Encyclopedia Britannica
Robert J. Samuelson: Alan Greenspan
Roger Scruton: Existentialism & Me

Truman Anderson: Helen Andrews: Terror in France
Michael Barone: Irwin Stelzer: Richard Vedder: How America Got Rich
Tod Lindberg: A History of Tyranny
Algis Valiunas: Thomas Alva Edison
Martha Bayles: Le Carré’s People

A Publication of the Claremont Institute
PRICE: $6.95
IN CANADA: $8.95
It turns out that the emerging Democratic Majority (2002), by Ruy Teixeira and John B. Judis, has a shrewdly unfalsifiable title. The fact that the Democratic majority has not yet emerged neither does nor can disprove the book's contention that it's still in the process of emerging. It's only a matter of time, albeit a good deal more time than we were led to believe when the book's thesis first thrilled Democrats and dismayed Republicans.

Hillary Clinton's loss in the 2016 election to the supposedly unelectable Donald Trump was bad enough. Democrats in politics and journalism quickly insisted that there was less to that contest's outcome than met the eye, blaming Clinton's defeat on the anti-majoritarian Electoral College, FBI Director James Comey, Russian hackers, "fake news," and her campaign's blunder in taking wins in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin for granted.

These efforts to reconcile Trump's victory with the idea that the Democrats are this century's natural governing majority cannot, however, account for congressional and state results. Democrats held 257 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives during Barack Obama's first year as president, 59.1% of the total, but now have only 194, 44.6%. Over the same eight years, the number of Democratic senators has fallen from 60 to 48. By the time the 2018 midterm elections take place, Republicans will have held a majority in the House for 20 of the preceding 24 years. In the Senate, where the GOP was defending 24 of the 34 seats up for election in 2016, including seven in states Barack Obama had carried twice, it was widely expected that Democrats would regain the majority they lost in 2014. Instead, they managed a net increase of just two senators, three fewer than needed to take control. (And the Democrats' immediate prospects are grim. Republicans currently hold only eight of the 33 Senate seats to be contested in 2018. Of the 25 seats Democrats must defend, five are in states—Indiana, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota, and West Virginia—where Hillary Clinton received less than 40% of the popular vote.) There were 29 Democratic governors in office when Barack Obama was first inaugurated, but only 16 today. In 2009, 56% of state legislators were Democrats; only 44% are now, a decline of nearly 1,000.

In short, with Democrats holding fewer offices and wielding less power than at any time since the 1920s, they do not look like a party on the verge of commanding an enduring majority. Emerging's co-authors are now...diverging. Ruy Teixeira still insists that the demographic trend is the Democrats' friend. The book had argued that as America becomes less white and better-educated, the GOP's weakness with every group other than white voters without a college degree would condemn it to decades of electoral defeat and governmental irrelevance. After Election Day Teixeira wrote, "Looking back from 2032, we are far more likely to view the 2016 election as the last stand of America's white working class, dreaming of a past that no longer exists, than as a fundamental transformation of the political system."

John Judis has become far more skeptical. When most Democratic analysts explained Republican gains in the 2014 midterm elections as the result of low turnout, a problem that would solve itself in a presidential election year, Judis cautioned that 2014 may not have been "an isolated event but rather the latest manifestation of a resurgent Republican coalition." The problem was that Democrats' "coalition of the ascendant"—minorities and millennials—wasn't ascending as fast as Democrats were losing votes from two large groups: whites without a college degree and whites with a four-year degree but no postgraduate one. Based on gains with these working- and middle-class voters, who ro-
The Democratic tent may or may not prove American politics.

Alba has challenged the widespread belief that Teixeira’s argument, however, tells Democrats that politics can be all about turnout, not persuasion. Since Democrats will win if they get enough of their voters to the polls, the only pressing demand is to motivate the party’s core clientele, constituents, and purpose.

Most fundamentally, sociologist Richard Alba has challenged the widespread belief that present demographic trends guarantee that by 2050 America will become a “majority-minority” nation. Many children with just one white parent or even grandparent, he argues, will grow up to consider themselves white rather than members of a minority group. Furthermore, cultural assimilation will work in tandem with biological mixing to increase the number of Americans who think of themselves as part of the mainstream, and reduce the number who regard themselves as members of “marginalized minorities.”

Understandably, Democrats are fond of the Teixeira thesis: it assures them that no matter how many bad Election Days they suffer, they’re not doing anything wrong and don’t need to do anything different. Persuading people receptive to some things you advocate but dubious about others is ordinarily considered essential to electoral politics. Teixeira’s argument, however, tells Democrats that politics can be all about turnout, not persuasion. Since Democrats will win if they get enough of their voters to the polls, the only pressing demand is to motivate the party’s core constituencies, not to devise appeals for other voters. Defeats are anomalies that call for staying the course rather than reconsidering it. After all, the groups that constitute the Democratic base will make up an even larger part of the electorate in the next election cycle, and a larger one still in the election after that.

Moral Panic

Democrats’ determination to tie their fortunes to the coalition of the ascendant rests, however, on something far stronger than inertia or risk-aversion. Democrats have come to regard the promotion of diversity, multiculturalism, and inclusion as their most urgent goal—indeed, the party’s reason for existence. As Sean Illing of Vox.com put it, “America was founded on a system of white supremacy, and contemporary liberal democracy is a necessary corrective to this.” Or, in the words of feminist author Linda Hirshman:

The American project started with white men’s freedom and equality, and has been, for more than two centuries, all about expanding the circle to include more and more people in that blessed plot. It has almost always been the left that forces such expansions.

Thus, to seek the votes of minorities and the marginalized is a practical imperative, but to champion their cause is a moral one. Any attempt to expand the Democratic coalition by diluting the ascendant groups’ claims betrays the party’s core clientele, constituents, and purpose.

Columbia University historian Mark Lilla discovered just how fiercely his fellow Democrats oppose any recalibration of their commitment to diversity when, ten days after the election, the New York Times website published his op-ed, “The End of Identity Liberalism.” It called for Democrats to get past the “moral panic about racial, gender and sexual identity that has distorted liberalism’s message and prevented it from becoming a unifying force capable of governing.” Democrats suffer avoidable electoral defeats. Lilla contended, because liberals’ “obsession with diversity has encouraged white, rural, religious Americans to think of themselves as a disadvantaged group whose identity is being threatened or ignored.” Identity liberalism’s electoral benefits cannot be detached from its costs. “Those who play the identity game should be prepared to lose it.”

Our nation’s politics, Lilla believes, “will be dominated by whoever best captures Americans’ imaginations about our shared destiny.” Thus, we need a “post-identity liberalism” that addresses “Americans as Americans” and emphasizes issues “that affect a vast majority of them.”

It would speak to the nation as a nation of citizens who are in this together and must help one another. As for narrower issues that are highly charged symbolically and can drive potential allies away, especially those touching on sexuality and religion, such a liberalism would work quietly, sensitively and with a proper sense of scale.

For all the good it did him, Lilla went out of his way to make clear that he wrote as a liberal Democrat enthused about making our national garden ever more splendidly variegated. He called Donald Trump’s victory “re-pugnant,” and hailed the “beautiful” process of America becoming more diverse as “an extraordinary success story.”

Katherine Franke, his Columbia faculty colleague, was not fooled. The day after Lilla’s essay appeared in print, she wrote that Lilla and David Duke were advancing the same cause: “the whitening of American nationalism, and the re-centering of white lives as lives that matter most in the U.S.” Lilla’s contribution to this project was “nuanced,” which made his efforts even more “nefarious” than Duke’s. The liberalism Lilla endorsed was not worthy of the name, in Franke’s view, since it regards as a mere “distraction” the “efforts of people of color and women to call out forms of power that sustain white supremacy and patriarchy.” In urging Democrats to appeal to as many Americans as possible in terms that resonate with all, Lilla erroneously and destructively imagines that what matters is “the idea of America as a shining city on a hill” that deserves our allegiance, not our protest.”

When asked by an interviewer about Franke’s attack, Lilla said simply, “I rest my case.” You get what he means. If the Democratic Party attempts to win elections by accusing people like Lilla, who support 99% of the diversity project, of being morally indistinguishable from people like David Duke, who oppose 100% of it, then many otherwise persuadable people in the middle regions of that spectrum are going to dismiss and resent entreaties to vote, speak, think, and live ever more multiculturally.

Franke’s inquisitorial approach is no idiosyncrasy, but the default mode for modern leftist discourse. Even before Election Day, some liberals were worrying that their history of rhetorical excesses had given rise to a “cry wolf” problem. That is, no thesaurus provided terms of alarm and condemnation strong enough to denounce Donald Trump and his supporters’ racism, given that the message came from the same sources who insist that George W. Bush, John McCain, Mitt Romney, and, now, Mark Lilla are also racists.
In 2012, for example, liberal columnist Michael Tomasky accused Romney of being a "race-baiter" and "race-mongering pyromaniac." The entirety of the prosecution's case was that in an address to the NAACP, Romney had used the word "Obamacare." Even though by 2012 that term was a ubiquitous descriptor, Tomasky still judged it to be, in context, a "loaded phrase" and "gratuitous broadsides." Little wonder that assertions of Trumpist bigotry over the course of the 2016 campaign got ever less traction as they became ever more strident.

And that was before the ballots were counted. After the astounding outcome—New Yorker editor David Remnick immediately declared Trump's victory a "tragedy," "sickening event," and "crushing blow to the spirit"—many Trump opponents apparently decided that their mistake had been too little stridency. The election results were, for Slate writer L.V. Anderson, bitterly clarifying, revealing to white liberals "our unjust, racist, sexist country for what it is."

Whitewash

This assessment would appear to contradict the contention that "America is already great," President Obama's rejoinder at the Democratic convention to Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan. But not really. The liberals Anderson speaks for had, before November 8, imagined that America was "making meaningful progress toward an era of "tolerance, justice, and respect for the dignity and rights of all," an illusion shattered by the election.

The belief in progress, of course, defines progressivism. Its adherents are necessarily, though usually implicitly, patriots of the reformed America of the future, and antagonists of the bentone of the past. A progressive can think that America is great if, and only if, it's making progress toward being great.

Barack Obama applauded this progress over and over, apparently in the hope that hailing it as an irresistible force would help make it one. The Reverend Jeremiah Wright's "profound mistake" in damning America was that "he spoke as if our society was static," Obama said in his 2008 "More Perfect Union" campaign speech. As president, at Selma, Alabama, in 2015, Obama lauded America as "a constant work in progress," a nation "unchurned by what it is" because it's always ready to "seize what ought to be."

His supporters who chanted "Yes we can" throughout 2008 ended 2016 confronting the grim possibility that maybe we can't. From their perspective, the fact that so many Americans want to make America great again means that Trump voters cannot or will not understand that our nation's heritage deserves protest, not allegiance. An America that suspends, abandons, or reverses the project of becoming great, of atoning for the historical sins that define it, is not now great but, rather, reprehensible. The 2016 contest, according to the Washington Post's Greg Sargent, pitted "an evolving America that embraces pluralism, tolerance, inclusion, and cultural change" against a reactionary one that demands "intolerance, bigotry, ethno-nationalism, and white identity politics." This is the "whitewash" theory of Trump's victory, put forward on Election Night by CNN commentator and former Obama Administration official Van Jones.

Thus, the refusal to make the first woman president the first black president's successor was a victory for the forces of oppression over those of liberation. Another Slate writer, Michelle Goldberg, declared, "In the defining drama of our time, a woman who was the most qualified person ever to run for president lost to a man who was the least." The election that was supposed to signal the collapse of the historical "gender hierarchy," Goldberg lamented, turned out to demonstrate that men still run things, and may well forever.

Identity-politics polemicists dismiss any consideration that might modify these harsh accusations. Didn't 41% of all women vote for Trump, for example, only three points less than Romney's showing in 2012? That result suggests that neither electing a woman president nor defeating her opponent—accused throughout the campaign of contempt for, and abuse of, women—was all that big a deal for many female voters.

Not so. Millions of women voted for Trump due to their "internalized misogyny," as one Clinton campaign aide, Jess McIntosh, explained on MSNBC. They voted against what McIntosh considered their self-inter-est because "[w]e as a society react poorly to women seeking positions of power."

And the exit polls showing that white women voted for Trump by 52% to 43%, even though "feminism...makes everybody feel good about themselves all the time," as one journalist argued! Racism, Amanda Marcotte explained in Salon: "Given the choice between improving their own lives and screwing over someone else's life so they can feel superior, large numbers of Americans will choose the latter."

But, again, wait. Basically, Donald Trump won by holding the Romney states and then carrying six others, with a total of 99 electoral votes, that Obama had won twice—Florida, Iowa, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. If white racism is so politically powerful, shouldn't it have prevented the election or re-election of America's first black president, rather than manifesting itself decisively only after he was off the ballot?

Nope. Indeed, to ask that hateful question not only fails to cast doubt on the pervasiveness of white racism, but strengthens the case for it by revealing the asker's bigotry. "Pointing to citizens who voted for both Obama and Trump does not disprove racism," pronounced the Atlantic's Ta-Nehisi Coates, "it evinces it." In the words of Slate's Jamelle Bouie, "Trump forged a politics of white tribalism, and white people embraced it." Which is why, he contends, there is no such thing as a good Trump voter. Whatever their motives or thinking, every last one of them voted for "state repression of disfavored minorities."

Well, is it possible that some part of the explanation for November's result, other than malevolent racist and sexism, is that Hillary Clinton really wasn't—despite fervent claims on her behalf—the most qualified candidate for high office in the history of carbon-based life forms? That she was better described as a mediocre politician who had been a national figure for a quarter-century without ever providing a persuasive rationale for being made president? ("I'm not going away until you give it to me," doesn't qualify, as Harold Stassen proved.) Coates allows that this may have been a problem. "Clinton was a candidate who'd won one competitive political race in her life," he correctly observes, "whose political instincts were questioned by her own advisers, who took more than half a million dollars in speaking fees from an investment bank because it was 'what they offered,' who proposed to bring back to the White House a former president dogged by allegations of rape and sexual harassment." So, then, maybe bigotry was not the sole or decisive factor?
New and Noteworthy Books from AEI Scholars

**Economic Freedom and Human Flourishing**
Perspectives from Political Philosophy
Edited by Michael R. Strain and Stan A. Veuger
October 3, 2016
So much of the policy debate around issues of economic liberty is cast in narrow terms. But it is helpful—and refreshing—to step back and examine the foundation. Is economic liberty necessary for individuals to lead truly flourishing lives? To answer this question, this volume brings to bear some of history’s greatest thinkers, interpreted by some of today’s leading scholars of their thought.

**The End of the Asian Century**
War, Stagnation, and the Risks to the World’s Most Dynamic Region
By Michael Auslin
January 10, 2017
ISBN: 978-0300212228
The world believes the “Asian Century” has arrived. Yet from China’s slumping economy to war clouds over the South China Sea, and from environmental devastation to demographic crisis, Asia’s future is increasingly uncertain. Historian and geopolitical expert Michael Auslin argues that far from being a cohesive powerhouse, Asia is a fractured region threatened by stagnation and instability.

**The US Labor Market**
Questions and Challenges for Public Policy
Edited by Michael R. Strain
October 24, 2016
ISBN: 978-0-8447-5008-8
Public policy is rightly concerned with fostering a vibrant labor market in which individuals can earn their own success, realize their potential, and enjoy the dignity that hard work provides. But it faces serious challenges in today’s labor market. Which characteristics of today’s labor market demand attention? Which are simply realities to be accepted? And how should policy respond?

**A Safety Net That Works**
Improving Federal Programs for Low-Income Americans
Edited by Robert Doar
February 2017
ISBN: 978-0-8447-5005-7
Political reality dictates that federal antipoverty programs are not going to disappear anytime soon, meaning leaders who are serious about helping poor Americans should learn how these programs work and how to improve them. This volume intends to help policymakers understand how major federal antipoverty programs function—their strengths, as well as their weaknesses.

**Is Congress Broken?**
The Virtues and Defects of Partisanship and Gridlock
Edited by Gary Schmitt, William Connelly Jr., and John Pitney Jr.
February 2017
ISBN: 978-0815730361
Congress for many years has ranked low in public esteem. Now, some of the country’s foremost experts on Congress focus on how Congress in the 21st century can once again fulfill its proper functions. The authors offer practical reforms that would maintain, rather than replace, the constitutional separation of powers that has served the nation well.

**The Imperial Presidency and the Constitution**
Edited by Gary J. Schmitt, Joseph M. Bessette, and Andrew E. Busch
March 2017
Time and again, the charge has been made that sitting presidents have behaved “imperially,” breaking the bounds of law and the Constitution. This volume examines this issue from various perspectives: analyzing the president’s role, addressing different presidents’ relationship with Congress and the Supreme Court, and exploring how the Constitution can help us assess the propriety of executive behavior.
Diversity, Tolerance, and Inclusion

When you lose the electoral contest, the ensuing challenge is to win the post-electoral interpretive contest. Ascribing the 2016 election to your opponents’ bigotry makes clear that the problem was not that Democrats didn’t do enough to deserve people’s votes, but that the people weren’t good enough to deserve Democrats’ governance. This posture is obviously satisfying—and obviously suicidal. As Lilla wrote in the Times, the whitelash thesis “is convenient because it sanctions a conviction of moral superiority and allows liberals to ignore what [Trump] voters said were their overriding concerns.”

One imagines that, sooner rather than later, even Democrats will come to suspect that denigrating people until they vote for you lacks a certain strategic plausibility. When joined, the debate over Lilla’s critique of identity will be contentious but also important. Speaking to National Public Radio about his essay, Lilla elaborated his position in formally provocative but substantively conciliatory language. Identity liberals “are in love with noble defeats,” he said, “and I’m sick and tired of noble defeats. I prefer a dirty victory to a noble defeat…. Get over yourself.”

If identity liberalism is noble, Lilla’s case against it rests entirely on the claim that as a practical matter it’s very ill-advised, given the political realities of early 21st-century America. The “core aim of political action in a liberal democracy,” Lilla told another interviewer, “is not to speak truth to power but to acquire power.” Elections are neither seminars nor therapy sessions, he added pointedly.

The fact that a smart man believes it necessary to explain such elementary concepts, as if to children, indicates how difficult it will be to loosen identity liberalism’s grip on the Democratic Party, even on pain of an electoral losing streak. Getting over yourself is exactly contrary to the whole point of identity politics, which is excessively preoccupied with identity, Lilla complains, and insufficiently concerned with politics. He calls it a “kind of pseudo-politics” that focuses on “questions of personal identity or social recognition.”

Lilla’s critics help to demonstrate his point. He identifies two examples of identity liberalism’s failure to “work quietly, sensitively and with a proper sense of scale.” First, some college policies now give students who feel their gender identities are ignored or disparaged by pronouns like “he” and “she” the right to be addressed by ones they consider more appropriate and respectful, including “they” (as...
a singular), “ve,” and “ze.” Second, the fight over who gets to use which public restrooms culminated in the Department of Justice and the Department of Education telling public schools that asking students to prove or document their gender identities before using the restroom of their choice could result in the loss of federal funding. (That 2016 letter of guidance was later blocked by a federal district court in Texas.)

Lilla’s dismissive argument, insists ACLU attorney Chase Strangio, a transgender man, “suggests marginalized communities should wait until white, straight men are comfortable before demanding their right to exist.” Lilla says, “America is sick and tired of hearing about liberals’ damn bathrooms.” Strangio, however, contends that such mainstreaming public policies are the difference between fighting “the impulse within myself” that I “should not exist,” and finding “my way to a sense of beauty and pride in who I am.

In a similar vein, Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote in 2008 of “the rage that lives in all African Americans, a collective feeling of disgrace that borders on self-hatred.” He further observed that, “Liberalism, with its pat logic and focus on structural inequities, offers no balm for this sort of raw pain.”

The problem is even more fundamental than Coates’s remark suggests. For one thing, asking public policy to make everybody feel good about themselves all the time is futile and dangerous. Liberalism, in the oldest and most basic sense of that term, obligates government to secure rights to liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But a right to the attainment of happiness, encompassing a sense of beauty and pride that banishes any sort of self-hatred, will require severe restrictions on liberty. If by criticizing or even withholding encouragement, you impair my self-esteem, then not only does my right to feel good about myself all the time circumscribe your words and conduct, but my subjective determination of whether I do feel proud or ashamed is the final arbiter of what you can’t and must say or do. Thanks to the rise of identity politics, the old Revolutionary rallying cry “Don’t Tread on Me” has been replaced with the 2016 Trump bumper sticker “F–k Your Feelings.”

Identity politics proceeds in the complacent assumption that diversity, tolerance, and inclusion mean pretty much the same thing. The reality is far messier. The etymology of “tolerance,” for example, rests on the Latin word for bearing or enduring, a notion mark-edly different from encouraging or affirming. The modest demand to put up with people, ideas, or customs you don’t like but which do no you no harm lubricates greater diversity. By contrast, the idea that true tolerance mandates applauding and welcoming any and all that are alien or disagreeable stokes resentment, which inevitably make getting along more rather than less difficult.

Inclusion is no less tricky. Being inside a group or entity is meaningless unless it’s possible to be outside. If everyone belongs, no one belongs. In 2010 the U.S. Supreme Court, divided 5-4, ruled that the University of California Hastings College of Law was right to demand, as a condition of being an official student organization, that every student be eligible to join the school’s Christian Legal Society. The decision means, in the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education’s summary, that a public university can “require its student organizations to accept any student as a voting member or leader, regardless of whether the student openly disagrees with or is even hostile to the group’s fundamental beliefs.” The nebulous though powerful right to be included supersedes the freedom of association. Because the Christian Legal Society was not utterly inclusive, Hastings College excluded it from the roster of recognized student organizations. Diversity did not encompass tolerating diverse opinions on this question.

Denigrating people until they vote for you lacks a certain strategic plausibility.

Universal Principles

In its obsession with self-validation, identity politics not only diminishes liberty but thwarts democracy. Its thoroughly subjectivity imposes what philosopher professor Cressida Heyes calls “an epistemology of provenance,” wherein “political perspectives gain legitimacy by virtue of their articulation by subjects of particular experiences.” The danger is that this framework “closes off the possibility of critique of these perspectives by those who don’t share the experience, which in turn inhibits political dialogue and coalition-building.” Lilla’s less abstract explanation to NPR made clear how identity liberalism, “narcissistic” and “isolating,” is politically self-defeating:

It says, on the one hand, you can never understand me because you are not exactly the kind of person I’ve defined myself to be. And on the other hand, you must recognize me and feel for me. Well, if you’re so different that I’m not able to get into your head and I’m not able to experience or to sympathize with what you experience, then why would I care?

Rather than betting liberalism’s political fortunes on voters’ limitless capacity to walk in others’ shoes and see through others’ eyes, Lilla argues the cause would be better served by appealing to principles applicable to all citizens. So, for example, invoking equal protection under the law is more likely to get a white voter to care about restraining police departments’ treatment of blacks than expecting him to comprehend and emotionally engage the black experience. The less sweeping but more comprehensible and powerful argument, says Lilla, is that blacks as citizens deserve protection. It’s worth remembering in this connection that the civil rights movement’s self-designation was not about identity or group rights, but about making categorical political commitments and principles universally applicable. This universality was lost when “civil rights” was challenged by “Black Power” in the 1960s.

Economist Glenn Loury, who is black, arrives at the same conclusion as Lilla. In a paraphrase of his thinking by the New Yorker’s George Packer, he warns against “race [becoming] an irreducible category in politics, rather than being incorporated into universal claims of justice.” We must not, says Loury, “lose sight of the goal of racially transcendent humanism being the American bedrock.”

Many, inside and outside academia, have already lost sight of it. The whole point of what some of theoracists call “identitarianism” is that achieving identity-transcending humanism is impossible, and seeking it pernicious. According to Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics (2001), by Sonia Kruks, the core identitarian claim is the “demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied: it is qua women, qua blacks, qua lesbians that groups demand recognition.” This demand means categorically rejecting “inclusion within the fold of universal humankind” on the basis of shared human attributes. The scare quotes scoff at the idea of universal humankind. Shared human attributes are irrelevant, and un-shared ones decisive. This formulation precludes respecting black citizens’ rights qua citizens, as Lilla urges.
identity politics may, however, demand more of unsympathetic whites. Those who do not require so much space to list all the ways white privilege has played out for them needn’t renounce their privilege; others stand ready to renounce it for them. New York Times numbers-cruncher Nate Cohn says that compared to either of Barack Obama’s presidential campaigns, Hillary Clinton ran especially well among whites making more than $250,000, winning “huge margins in the most well-educated and prosperous liberal bastions.” She won landslides in such “old-money Republican enclave[s]” as Scarsdale, New York; Greenwich, Connecticut; and Glencoe and Winnetka, Illinois.

By contrast, Donald Trump won Dubuque County, Iowa, by 1.3%. I mention Dubuque because when President Obama’s Department of Housing and Urban Development threatened to close the town for taking too few Section 8 housing voucher applicants from Chicago, which had torn down its massive public housing projects without creating enough homes for the displaced low-income residents, it chose to play hardball with Dubuque. Not Winnetka, which is 20 miles from the Loop, or Glencoe, 25 miles away, but a small, struggling city in a different state, 180 miles distant. Winnetka, Glencoe, and Dubuque all have populations that are more than 90% white and less than 5% black. The difference is that in Winnetka the median household income is $212,000 and the median home value is $958,000. In Glencoe, the corresponding figures are $180,000 and $880,000. Dubuque’s median income is $47,000, below Iowa’s overall figure, and the median home value is $133,000. Having voted for her overwhelmingly, the enlightened citizens of Winnetka and Glencoe could watch Hillary Clinton’s concession speech with dismay, indignant at the prospect that the new Republican administration would enable Dubuque’s oppressors to reassert their privilege.

A significant portion of the Clinton coalition appears to be blessed with the special combination of a social conscience, determination, and resourcefulness that allows them to expiate their guilt by devising penances to be imposed on other people. A significant portion of the Trump coalition believes that they are the other people conscripted for these atonements, a division of labor they deeply resent. The 2016 main event between these two groups will someday be remembered as the Insufferables versus the Deplorables.

Hillary Clinton’s famous accusation about the latter was that a large portion of Trump supporters—she subsequently walked back the claim that it was half—were “irredeemable” and “not America” by virtue of their being “racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic—you name it.” It’s gratifying for identity liberals to hold as self-evident...
the truth that the identitarian project’s opponents have no motives apart from hate, irrational fears, and demographic revanchism. This analysis helps convince those who were on the wrong side of an election outcome that they are still, always, on the right side of history. Democrats might, however, help their cause by considering Lilla’s suggestion and entertaining the possibility that many anti-identitarian Trump voters understood themselves to be acting in self-defense. Harvard law professor Mark Tushnet, for example, made clear the modus operandi of the anticipated Democratic president and Senate in a May 2016 blog post. Expecting that the Obama presidency would conclude, or if the Hillary Clinton presidency began, by filling the Anthony Kennedy Supreme Court vacancy, followed by President Clinton appointing several additional liberal justices, Tushnet called on liberal jurists to be maximally aggressive in overturning old precedents and establishing new ones. He looked forward, for starters, to the courts validating and facilitating the aggressive expansion of affirmative action, campaign finance reform, access to abortion, and use of the disparate-impact test to reduce all kinds of inequalities. “The culture wars are over,” he said. “They lost; we won.”

For liberals, the question now is how to deal with the losers in the culture wars. That’s mostly a question of tactics. My own judgment is that taking a hard line (“You lost, live with it”) is better than trying to accommodate the losers, who—remember—defended, and are defending, positions that liberals regard as having no normative pull at all. Trying to be nice to the losers didn’t work well after the Civil War, nor after Brown. (And taking a hard line seemed to work reasonably well in Germany and Japan after 1945.)

“Of course,” he allowed, “all bets are off if Donald Trump becomes president.” Many Americans realized, with Tushnet’s help, that the stakes were so high as to merit comparisons to a conquered people living in an occupied country. Not surprisingly, such threats ended up helping Trump with voters who may have had deep misgivings about him.

One begins to understand that The Emerging Democratic Majority’s argument was so popular because Democrats were committed to becoming a party that could win elections in majority-minority America. The danger is of becoming a party that cannot be confident about winning until and unless majority-minority America comes to pass. Democrats need an in-the-meantime strategy, especially if the meantime turns out to be a very long time. Replicating Barack Obama’s coalition and victories may prove impossible without nominees who replicate his campaign skills—talents that cannot be summoned just because they’re indispensable.

Democrats would hedge their bets and improve their chances by doing better with white voters who live outside the liberal archipelago of college towns, gentry suburbs, and big-city hipster neighborhoods. Hillary Clinton’s strategists, however, thought campaigning among white working-class voters, as Bill Clinton repeatedly urged, was a waste of time. No Democratic presidential nominee has won West Virginia since he carried it twice in the 1990s. And, one of her advisors told the former president, no Democrat would do so again.

Post-2016 Democrats, chastened, are likely to rediscover a basic political reality: victory requires winning by as much as you can where you win, but also losing by as little as you can where you lose. Winning West Virginia may be out of the question for Democrats, but losing by smaller margins in portions of swing states whose voters have concerns and outlooks similar to West Virginia’s could make a decisive difference.

Through such calculations, Democrats might be led to engage Mark Lilla’s critique of identity liberalism in order to avoid repeating noble defeats like 2016. Doing so will be very difficult, however, while remaining convinced of identitarianism’s nobility. Even a politician more adept than Hillary Clinton will be challenged to anathemize and attract the same voters simultaneously.

The result Lilla seeks, a more competitive Democratic Party, will require taking up and then going beyond his argument. Identity liberalism is not just imprudent but morally wrong in reducing identity to subjective reactions to victimhood, and rejecting equal treatment under the law in favor of “sliding scales” that are subject to infinite adjustments and flagrant manipulations. Understanding that the defeats caused by this identity illiberalism are deserved, not noble, is necessary before going on to address productively the Democratic and American challenge of refining and clarifying the basis on which a heterogeneous nation can cohere and sustain its republic.

William Voegeli is a senior editor of the Claremont Review of Books, and the author, most recently, of The Pity Party: A Mean-Spirited Diatribe Against Liberal Compassion (Broadside Books).
Subscribe to the Claremont Review of Books

“Virtually every critique of the Progressive Era in the last ten years in any conservative publication or forum can be traced back to the work of the Claremont Institute, the CRB, and her contributors in one way or another.”
—Jonah Goldberg

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

To begin receiving America’s premier conservative book review, visit www.claremont.org/crb or call (909) 981-2200.