

TRUMPISM AFTER TRUMP

Will the movement outlive the man?

By Thomas Meaney

DAY ONE

The course of true nationalism never did run smooth.

—Ernest Gellner

The city was not beautiful; no one made that claim for it. At the height of summer, people in suits, shellacked by the sun, moved like harassed insects to avoid the concentrated light. There was a civil war–like fracture in America—the president had said so—but little of it showed in the capital. Everyone was polite and smooth in their exchanges. The corridor between Dupont Circle and Georgetown was like the dream of Yugoslav planners: long blocks of uniform earth-toned buildings that made the classical edifices of the Hill seem the residue of ancestors straining for pedigree. Bunting, starched and perfectly ruffled in red-white-and-blue fans, hung everywhere—from air conditioners, from gutters, from statues of dead revolutionaries. Coming from Berlin, where the manual laborers are white, I felt as though I was entering the heart of a caste civilization. Untouchables in hard hats drilled

into sidewalks, carried pylons, and ate lunch from metal boxes, while waiters in restaurants complimented old respectable bobbing heads on how well they were progressing with their rib eyes and iceberg wedges.



I had come to Washington to witness either the birth of an ideology or what may turn out to be the passing of a kidney stone through the Republican Party. There was a new movement afoot: National Conservatives, they called themselves, and they were

gathering here, at the Ritz-Carlton, at 22nd Street and M. Disparate tribes had posted up for the potlatch: reformacons, blood-and-soilers, curious liberal nationalists, “Austrians,” repentant neocons, evangelical Christians, corporate raiders, cattle ranchers, Silicon Valley dissidents, Buckleyites, Straussians, Orthodox Jews, Catholics, Mormons, Tories, dark-web spiders, tradcons, Lone Conservatives, Fed-Socs, Young Republicans, Reaganites in amber. Most straddled more than one category.

They were here because of one undeniable fact: Donald Trump was going to die. Trump might be ejected from office or lose the election or win the election—but he was, also, definitely going to die. And Trumpism needed to survive. It was just getting started. If Trumpism were snuffed out with Trump, Republicans would fall back into march with the party lemmings in hock to their donors (hardly any Republican voters agreed with the donors about anything, as Trump had intuited), who would connive with liberals to contaminate the country with more immigration, more Big Tech treason, more “free” trade, more endless wars, more slouching toward nihilism.

Thomas Meaney is a fellow at the Max Planck Society in Göttingen, Germany.

The ancien régime was threatening to reconstitute itself.

Someone had to stand up for Trumpism in the noble abstract. Someone philosophical, who knew how to extract timelessness from the tawdriness. Trump the Man might be crude and venal, but Trump the Spirit had opened a trapdoor in history. Some political-theological exegesis would be required to unspool the nature of the accomplishment. The old world of the Cold War and the American Empire was over; an older world of nations—a *community* of nations! A *brotherhood*!—was struggling to be reborn. Orbán, Bolsonaro, Bibi, Boris—all were wise to it, while liberal professors sat on panels about “Hungary’s Wrong Turn” or “Israel’s Self-Impllosion” or “The Brexit Backwash,” as if History were a hedgerow only they were privileged to prune. Had they no eyes? China was about to decide whether it preferred curtailing its exports or eating grass. Germany was primed to be pastoralized at last, once Detroit patented the right car battery. It was house-hunting season in the West Bank—did you know a good broker? American industry was at a halftime pause, waiting for Clint Eastwood’s voice-over to resume. Was there room at Guantánamo for the executive board of Google? The drugs needed to flow back *out*—a new Opium War!—and the jobs needed to flow back *in*—full employment! A few good NatCons could keep the Republican zombie-archy at bay. Fox News might well fall into conniptions at the notion, but what was needed was “class warfare”—or perhaps more precisely, a war within the elites—to ensure that the future remained Trumpian and did not revert to the globalist highway to nowhere.

“I’m from the lesbian armpit of Australia!” said a buoyant young blond man, fresh off the plane from his woke-infected hometown of Melbourne. We were thick in the melee of the hotel’s bowels. People were collecting their National Conservatism folders and pens, adjusting their name tags. Lounging in plush chairs and couches were all manner of professional and amateur right-wingers—lawyers, radio hosts, professors, and journalists, all thrilled to find themselves in public so unspurned. In the

faux-silk-lined hallway leading into the main ballroom, I watched a Texan’s cowboy hat get within kissing range of a rabbi’s Borsalino.

The Australian was named Jack. He was there with the blessing of his MP boss to make contact with allies and convey the warmest greetings. “It’s exciting to be among so many intelligent people!” Jack was addressing a dour undergraduate from the University of Texas, who was scanning the crowd for luminaries and idly fielding Jack’s questions. “How did you get here?” “I was sort of sick of the libertarian choke hold on campus. I’ve read Carlyle and Evola. And Hazony,

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obviously. But the College Republicans are still pretty captured by libertarian dogma. Like, no interest in political economy, or a national industrial policy, or anything. I found these folks online. These guys, these are the guys I like.”

The high degree of bonhomie in the ballroom was hard to deny. Conservatives in their comfort zones can establish an instant rapport. Aloofness is rapidly abandoned as a hindrance to the assembly of a highly charged emotional grid. The speed of social fusion exceeds its own object, so that everyone already seems prepared to bleed for they know not yet what.

We ambled toward the dinner tables just as the Russia jokes began. “I’d call this stage the presidium, but I don’t want to be accused of collusion with Russia,” announced the stony moderator Christopher DeMuth, Reagan’s first-term “deregulation czar.” He handed over the reins to David Brog, a more treacherly specimen. Brog had worked for the end-times televangelist John Hagee’s Christians United for Israel before heading up Sheldon Adelson’s Maccabee Task Force to fight the BDS movement. He was one of about a half

a dozen organizers of the National Conservatism Conference. “We are not alone anymore,” Brog bleated. “We want to be connected, connected to one another, connected to our descendants. . . . Our American brothers and sisters are crying out.”

His voice floated higher in register until it was full eighteenth-century oracular, the Great Awakening returned. “We’ve read Burke and our Bibles.” It was very heaven to be alive now, Brog observed. Brexit was a sign. “The British people literally stood astride history and yelled ‘stop!’ They refused to sell the birthright of their sovereignty for the shiny coins of higher GDP.” And then came a line that seemed lobbed over the assembled guests directly at Jennifer Schuessler, cultural correspondent for the *New York Times*, who was sitting in the far back of the ballroom. “We are nationalists, not *white* nationalists! But no screening system is perfect, so if there’s anyone here tonight who believes being an American has anything whatsoever to do with the color of someone’s skin, there is the door.” No one stood up to leave; therefore let it be known that there were no racists breaking bread among us.

Brog next lanced various simulacra of common sense. “We give no aid to our immigrants when we promote the erosion of the reason they moved here in the first place.” Only by denying immigrants’ dreams could those dreams be fulfilled. . . . He ended with pure singsong sweetness, chirping out some Whitman to the congregants: “Camerado, I give you my hand! I give you love *more precious than money!*”

But money could not altogether be expelled from the temple. One of the conference’s backers was Colin Moran, a New York hedge funder, who got up and told the audience that he liked every damn thing about National Conservatism. He didn’t think it was antimarket at all—hell it would probably be better for the market, or at least *his* market. “It’s sometimes said that the new National Conservatism is hostile to capitalism,” DeMuth added. He smiled. “To rebut these *scurrilous* allegations, we will now hear from one of the titans of American finance. Ladies and gentlemen, Peter Thiel!”

Thiel was a possible prototype of the new elite the NatCons wanted to propagate. He came equipped with a blowtorch to illuminate the meritocratic conspiracy among corporations and government and media. Yes, Thiel was a destroyer-entrepreneur straight out of the pages of Schumpeter. In the fairy-tale world of Silicon Valley startups—most of which were coquettishly waiting for a Wall Street manager to take them public or for Facebook to acquire them—Thiel was a swashbuckling privateer. He could take a machete to the hedgerow view of history. Like the most effective reactionaries, he was all-in on technology—but on his own terms. He had co-founded PayPal, a venture that might at first seem too prosaic, even beneath him, until you remember that PayPal's original mission was to become a global currency. Thiel was going to make great stuff again, not just new iterations of phones. He was going to reconnect technological advancement with political revolution. He was going to colonize the moon. He was going to extinguish enemies with vengeance. Any American journalist of my generation had to treat that last ambition with a touch of respect: after a gratuitous violation of his privacy, Thiel had, in an act of twenty-first-century *lèse-majesté*, singlehandedly eviscerated one of the breeding grounds of New York journalism—*Gawker*. There were more habitats out there he could scorch to the ground.

Thiel was a seasoned speaker. He'd stumped at the Republican National Convention; he'd given Trump a million dollars and counseled him to become disrupter-in-chief. Thiel claimed to have received little grief from Trump-endorsing evangelicals for being gay, nor, it seemed, would he get much from NatCons, who mostly held fast to the Walt Whitman position on homosexuality and nationalism. Though Thiel's delivery was constipated and robotic, he came across as someone who could beam himself somewhere else at any given moment, and so his sheer presence and attention flattered the audience. He announced his intention to stick to "the spirit of what I

think we're trying to accomplish, which is widening the Overton window of discourse." Then his mouth dropped open like a torpedo bay, and out propelled a series of questions:

Is Big Tech good for the United States of America?
Is free trade good for the U.S. of A.?
Is college good for the U.S.?
Is war good for us?

Thiel was going to "drill down into some of the particulars" of these



matters. Google? It had lost any attachment to the American nation, and it was in bed with Chinese intelligence. Its executives should be interrogated "in a not excessively gentle way." Then came an interesting twist: China was dirtying up the whole globe, Thiel said. He suggested that the 25 percent tariff on Chinese goods be "reframed" as a carbon tax, "and maybe the twenty-five percent is a floor and not a ceiling." The audience loved the way he was co-opting a left-wing cause (climate change) for NatCon ends (American greatness). It was even perhaps more subtle than that: co-opting a left-wing policy program (carbon-taxing a country in order to encourage it to green its economy) and just insisting that its content was populist protectionist. The Trump team, according to Thiel, already had the correct instincts on trade: "You don't want people negoti-

ating trade treaties who dogmatically believe in free trade, because the worse they are at negotiating, the better job they think they do."

But where Thiel really hit his stride—where he began to kill—was on the composition of the American elite. The factories that produce this elite were the universities, and that was the place to train the bomb sights. The thousands of third-rate colleges should be destroyed with criminal investigations while the Ivies and other elite universities were taxed into oblivion. For there was nothing so big as the self-flattering lies told in America about education: that there were so many good schools and that these institutions were the best place for selecting and training elites rather than just confirming and credentialing them. He quoted Michelle Obama talking about her daughters' applications to college:

The one thing I've been telling my daughters is that I don't want them to choose a name. I don't want them to think, "Oh, I should go to these top schools." We live in a country where there are thousands of amazing universities. So the question is: What's going to work for you?

"In their defense, they don't actually believe it," Thiel said. "And I would worry about them even more if they actually did." Shortly after Obama's remarks, her elder daughter went off to Harvard. Thiel would have been "very disturbed" if they'd sent her to the one-thousandth ranked school instead. This was genuinely funny. Rolling the Obamas over the coals of their own utterances never got old. But Thiel had done more than his duty to National Conservatism by intimating that a new elite could still come into being. It would be a techy elite, and a very small one, but one that served the homeland, whose normal citizens would graze among the infinite pleasures provided them. The coming elite would recognize the con of mass education and spare millions the dunce hat of the community college or the online university. Thiel himself had already tried to buy out promising young coders

from going to college in the first place: the Thiel Fellowship accepted applications on a rolling basis and paid grantees six figures not to go to school. A picture of the Thielian version of the NatCon future was coming into focus: rooms of talented fifteen-year-olds finding new ways to drill into the earth's core and lower temperatures through sublime acts of geologic engineering. Children were our future, if they could avoid college. Our savior was not the tech-abstinence-preaching Greta Thunberg, but some as yet unknown prodigy, funded by Thiel, who would figure out how to recode the physical processes of the planet.

Thiel's private effort to siphon off a natural aristocracy of talent from the doomed universities by plying them with cash and lab time was part of the larger field of NatCon thought. Trump had won the election by feeding the insatiable anti-elitist hunger in the nation. The Clintons had cooperated perfectly. But nationalists and populists have as much need for elites as anyone else. In the first flush of European nationalism, members of the Napoleonic generation found themselves promoted from cannoners to princes of freshly conquered states. The Third World nationalists who came to power in decolonizing nations in the 1960s had only recently formed a stratum of colonial rule: lawyers, doctors, poets, and soldiers. The trouble now in the United States was that the would-have-been regional ruling class had been sucked out of every corner of the heartland to join the ranks of the global meritocracy, leaving the ranks of the local elite nearly empty. Anyone visiting an Ivy League classroom could encounter twenty bright teenagers from all over the world—a few of them vacuumed out of obscure corners of the U.S.A.—who all spoke the same gradient of English, streamed the same TV series, and believed that they represented diversity. The clever sell of the Pete Buttigieg and Rory Stewarts of the moment was to at least simulate the return-to-Ithaca drama of a globalist come home to pay regional amends. But what if meritocratic elites in general were the prob-

lem? Edmund Burke himself had been notoriously skeptical of them, especially those like himself: better to be governed by half-demented aristocrats with long-standing claims to land and title than by intellectual hustlers who misconstrue their own rocketing social ascent with the lift-off of humanity in general.

As Thiel was escorted off the stage through a parted sea of fans, I moved to the center of the ballroom. Something curious was happening. There was a young man in a vintage tan Nehru jacket



speaking to a group of a dozen younger people in suits and dresses. The subject appeared to be poetry. "And so Dickinson's editor, this guy Thomas Wentworth Higginson, is actually in contact with John Brown." It was too propitious—to have the chance this early in the conference to put in a word for John Brown. "What's the problem with John Brown?" I asked him. The young man in the Nehru jacket blinked slowly, tortoiselike, and a knowing smile arrived. "Only that he was a terrorist, only that he's the equivalent of a pro-life activist today who blows up abortion clinics because of the evil inside them."

"Doesn't it depend on what your cause is, though?"

"Are you a communist or something?" he asked, in a friendly, sparring

way. "I mean, it's okay if you are; I'm so far right that I'm in Maoist territory." The speaker was Curtis Yarvin, a Silicon Valley star of the neo-reactionary web, whose Thiel-backed technology, Urbit, was meant to reinvent computing (everyone would have access to their own fiercely sovereign servers and would not have to bow to Big Tech). Yarvin the Dark Knight had written a series of texts under the name Mencius Moldbug, making him a revered "alt-right" pamphleteer.

I walked outside with the Dark Knight and two Stanford undergraduates to the corner of M and 22nd. "This guy is kind of famous," said Undergrad One. The undergrads had both recently taken a course taught by Thiel. "He made us read Carl Schmitt's *Land and Sea*," said Undergrad Two. "It was awesome." The pair worked as assistants to Niall Ferguson, the conservative historian who had gotten himself into trouble at Stanford's Hoover Institution for encouraging "oppo research" on a liberal student. "Oh man, it was bullshit. They only got Ferguson because Susan Rice's son accidentally forwarded a whole email chain to some unreliable student."

"Wait, you mean Susan Rice—"

"Totally conservative, her son, yeah," said Undergrad One.

The Dark Knight was in a gregarious mood. "I just wanted to get out and see what's going on with the official conservatives these days," he told the group. "It's cool that they let me come." Undergrad One said he was intrigued by the anti-imperial tenor at the conference. "We should just dismantle the empire," the Dark Knight said. "It could be done so quickly if you really wanted to. All our embassies could be wrapped up right away. There's nothing in the Constitution that says we have to have embassies. All of those staffs could come home. We can conduct diplomatic relations via Skype. This idea that we need people over there is so ridiculous, such an anachronism." "What about Israel?" asked Undergrad Two. "Do you know how much we contribute to the Israeli defense budget?" said the Dark Knight. "It's something like three or four percent—peanuts. I think we

should let them loose. Is anybody really going to want to fuck with Israel? I'd say you'd see Israel picking up new territory in no time if we just let them go. We could roll in our empire, and let them give empire a shot. Theirs could stretch from Beirut to Rabat. I mean, they're Jews—they'll figure it out."

The Dark Knight overflowed with antiquarian theories and gleanings. His thoughts kept circling back to the midcentury right-winger James Burnham, a hallowed figure among the NatCons. Burnham's trajectory perfectly matched the moment. He'd begun his career as a mild-mannered professor of philosophy, a genteel Princetonian whom one student described as having walked out of a T. S. Eliot poem, but some vision amid the Great Depression had changed him. Though he was dazzled by his Marxist colleague Sidney Hook, and by his encounter with Leon Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, which he interpreted as a coming attraction for America, it still took a car ride through Detroit, the epicenter of the Depression, to clinch Burnham's conversion. "The class struggle, the starvation and terror in act" that he witnessed among the city's autoworkers convinced him that capitalism was ruined forever; he wanted to be a part of what came next.

At NYU, Burnham still lectured on Aquinas and Dante, but he was increasingly occupied with drafting strategies for Communist Party discipline. His attacks on Franklin Roosevelt, whom he accused of being an incipient totalitarian, were even more vitriolic than the conservative attacks on the New Deal. Trotsky, in exile on the island of Büyükada off Istanbul, was so taken with Comrade Burnham's agit-prop that he marked him as a protégé. Some organizers around Burnham were put off by his tailored suits, his taste for champagne and baccarat, and his dry patrician monotone, but this was also part of what made him useful; he lent American Marxism a dignified patina. Burnham broke with the Trotskyites over the question of whether the Soviet Union was in fact a worker's state. Trotsky thought it still qualified despite the corruptions of Stalinism; Burnham thought it did not. From his reading of

New Deal critics of the modern corporation, such as Adolf Berle and Gardiner Means, Burnham came to believe that the Soviet Union and the United States were converging on a kind of managerialism: two only marginally different planned economies, with little place for individual freedom. He started drifting to the right, and eventually wound up as the in-house guru of William F. Buckley's *National Review*. But his professional life did have some coherence over the decades. It was spent taking up positions from various crumbling ideological ramparts to get a better shot in at his lifelong enemy: the liberal elite. Burnham could summon a good word for the Black Panthers, LSD, and Woodstock, which had at

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least sent some shockwaves to Vital Center Command Control.

Refreshingly, the NatCons and the Dark Knight were interested not in Burnham's avowedly right-wing phase—when brittle treatises such as *The Suicide of the West* (1964) appeared—but in his earlier, more ambivalent wartime output, *The Managerial Revolution* (1941) and *The Machiavellians* (1943), which were written in an era when Burnham was still contending with "remnants of Marxism." These books, invoked by NatCons throughout my days in Washington, worked like a back door through which they could smuggle materialism into their program. Other phrases that I did not associate with conservatives were brought out like worn old pieces of family furniture, each brokered by trustworthy conservative middlemen. "The ruling class" was often cited at the Ritz, or, just as commonly, "the ruling class, as Angelo Codevilla calls it"—a reference to the intelligence analyst, conservative professor, and writer for the *Claremont Review of Books*.

Burnham's chief idea—adopted by Yarvin—was that the American elite had become a managerial class that acted as guardians over institutions, the

academy, and the professions. They were not aristocrats, nor were they capitalist tycoons, but rather an office-bound species that merely understood the techniques of governance and as a class no longer bothered with questions of their own legitimacy. Burnham had counseled a kind of equanimity in the face of this technocratic elite—the best you could do was to pit elites against one another in order to create space for concessionary freedoms. But Yarvin was more intent on destroying it. He believed that the United States was simply a more advanced form of totalitarianism than China. It had decentralized its despotism, spread it among different sectors, but the totalitarian imprint was still there: Americans who watched Fox

News were captive to one narrative, and those who watched MSNBC were captive to another. But for Yarvin the trouble was that the original mythology of American democracy was breaking down. One could keep believing in it for only so long, just as it had required herculean myopia to continue to believe in

Third World liberation long after its expiration date. Did anyone really still believe in American postwar innocence? Yarvin played at drawing the stench of the firebombing of Dresden into his nostrils. Did anyone still believe that liberal elites wanted equality in education? And so Yarvin had identified a groaning gap in the conference. "It will be interesting to see what kind of elite they come up with," he said.

DAY TWO

God's used imperfect people all through history. King David wasn't perfect, Saul wasn't perfect, Solomon wasn't perfect. And I actually gave the president a little one-pager on those Old Testament kings . . . I said, "Mr. President, I know there are people that say, y'know, 'You said you were the chosen one.'" And, I said: "You were."

—Rick Perry

The second day of the National Conservatism Conference was a day of myth maintenance. The men of God were gearing up. Peter Thiel had worried that the American right was still in thrall to the myth of American exceptionalism when what

was needed was the opposite: more comparisons of America with other countries to see where it fell short, more competition fueled by the intimation that we might not be special at all. Yarvin had wondered late into the night where the new myths could come from. The Silicon Valley contingent, Promethean in outlook, did not have much time for God.

It was the moment for a Christian nationalist to ascend the mount. They were hardly endangered. Over the summer, Hungary's Viktor Orbán had given a speech in a small Romanian village proclaiming the blooming of a re-Christianized Europe. R. R. "Rusty" Reno, another conference organizer and the editor of the ecumenical, Catholic-inflected journal *First Things*, was in the strange position of having to reconcile nationalism and Christianity all over again for a twenty-first-century audience. He took to the task with a weary sense of duty, the creep of melancholy in his voice, as he bore his burden in plain sight of his congregants. "The anti-elite, populist sentiments that are abroad at the moment," Reno told us, "are best understood as expressions of the American love for self-government. Faced with a liberal empire, overseen by a technocratic elite, the American people have become truculent. This is true on the left and the right. Count me as no fan of socialism, but I interpret its rhetorical return in the Democratic Party as a sign that Democratic voters want to recover their political agency. . . . I dread the triumph of these loveless visions of our political future; for they mean the end of the democratic age, and its supersession by a managerial, therapeutic empire run by central bankers and diversity consultants."

For Reno, the particularities of the nation were not only reconcilable with Christianity, they furthered its cause. Scripture was unmistakable: "If anyone does not provide for his own people, and especially his own family, he has disowned his faith and is worse than an infidel" (1 Timothy 5:8). The nation was no false idol for Reno. God in His benevolence had provided it "as a further remedy for our sinful self-regard." Catholics could excuse passionate love of your mate if it brought you closer to God; the nation was a much higher ver-

sion of that. It would be a twisted act to try to take patriotic love away from our fellow citizens. "Many of our fellow Americans have made a mess of their lives in various ways, and they haven't accomplished very much—unlike many of us in the room—and for many of them their citizenship is their most precious possession, from which they draw the greatest honor. It's not enough that we take away the functional family life—we even have to take away their own citizenship, or their love of their own citizenship." Reno was proffering a peculiar notion of worldly success, and one could sense some self-flattery working within him. But elsewhere his speech took a wilder turn. "There is a potential for a great deal of

FOR R. R. RENO, THE NATION WAS NOT ONLY RECONCILABLE WITH CHRISTIANITY BUT FURTHERED ITS CAUSE

mischief if we fuse church with nation," he said. "There are bishops in the Catholic Church in the United States and Europe and Protestant pastors who judge prudent restrictions on immigration to be violations of biblical ideals of universal welcome and universal hospitality, but these ideals apply to the people of God, to the Church, not to the United States of America."

What was meant by this? That border crossing was permissible for people in their capacity as Christians but not in their capacity as Mexicans? I had a vision of El Paso, of trucks of Mexican Christians arriving at a megachurch. Old white Texan gentlemen help the elderly Mexican gentlewomen down the stairs, leading them arm in arm into the church where in booming English with Spanish subtitles a minister preaches the bounty of Christian union, and baptisms are performed on small Mexican babies. At the tea and biscuits session after the service, one of the elderly Texans notices a bulge under the loose clothing of a young Mexican woman. "Get 'em out of here!" The bonds of Christian fellowship having been observed, it is now time to sound the alarm of national solidarity: the

visiting worshippers are dispatched in black vans with papered-over windows to the deepest reaches of the Yucatán. "Next time we'll do the service over Skype. That will be better for everyone," says the minister, hat in his hands. "No need to have them on the soil when we already coexist on a spiritual plane."

While it had fallen to Reno to square Christian universalism with nationalist particularism, Yoram Hazony made bolder claims for his faith. Launching out against a hundred years of historiography, Hazony claimed that, no, nationalism was not about forgetting things in common or sharing a mistaken view of the past; it was about keeping a covenant with God. For Hazony—founder of the *Princeton Tory*, onetime confidant of Netanyahu, and chief Talmudist of National Conservatism—nationalism *began* with the Hebrews. Donald Trump might speak in slogans, but he was also speaking the Torah. The Hebrew God "doesn't say go out and conquer all the nations of the world. He says, You stay behind your border." You can have this patch of land for your people, and it will become great; other peoples can do the same on their patches. And so, after a break of a few thousand years, the Dutch, the English, and finally the Americans all copied the original.

Hazony's lecture stuck to the wagon ruts of traditional nationalist thought. There had been Jewish nationalists—Zionists after all—going back to the nineteenth century. Earlier, the American Founders and their English forerunners had borrowed the ideas of a chosen state from Jewish thinkers. The trouble was not merely that Hazony swept under the carpet all the difficulties of actually existing nationalism—Where does it begin? Where does it end? Who is in and who is out?—but that he was sacralizing a political compromise as a God-directed project. With the borders sacred, and the exact mixture of people within them sacred, considerable subterfuge and violence were now justifiable in defending the frozen state of this order.

It would have been mete and right for such somber tones to be followed by organ music. Instead, after a coffee break, there came National Conservatism's long-awaited jester.

"You gotta love Tucker," as Stanford Undergraduate One had put it. Tucker Carlson was the leading propagandist of the cause. He had his own show on Fox News. He did daily battle with the enemy. And not only battle; Tucker even extracted what he liked from the *Jacobin*-magazine left, twisted it around, and sold it at a discount to his followers. He hated liberals, but he resented the left for leaving his hypocrisy flagrantly exposed. And so he seesawed between this hatred and this resentment. In the resentment there was a kind of respect; in the hatred there was mirthful righteousness.

"I actually have contact with the people the rest of us complain about," he began his speech—and, lo, it was true. Not only did he have his makeup done by liberals and communists five days a week, but nearly everyone in the media wanted to stop him. They didn't succeed because, even within the narrow constraints of monopoly capitalism, Tucker, like a Christian among the Romans, was able to get the word out, and his virtuous flock heeded the call.

The NatCons were in awe of the great deflection service Tucker provided for the American ruling class: identifying actual material grievances and laboriously laundering them into petty insecurities familiar from the Nineties culture wars. Tucker preached the National Conservatism Gospel even without quite understanding it. The organizers believed he contained a wisdom he himself did not fully recognize, like a fool in Shakespeare. His demeanor was bouncy and cheerful: the vibe was part Groton lacrosse cheerleader, part finance frat boy. His face was ruddied from his summer in Maine, where he'd been communing with his ethnoses. His pace was a bit stop-and-start at the beginning—he'd just given up nicotine—but his signature tic was there: the planted joke, followed by the waterfall, throw-back-the-head, court-of-Versailles laugh. He was like a man who looked down at his mouth amazed that it had been transformed into a giant conveyor belt dispensing perfect modules of common sense. His trust in his subjective experience was immense.

Tucker had some tough news for the assembled faithful. "Big Business Hates Your Family" was the title of his talk.

Monopoly capitalism was real. "The main threat to your ability to live your life as you choose does not come from the government, but comes from the private sector," Tucker said. "I was trained from the youngest age, from a pup, to believe that the threats to liberty came from government. . . . And so it really took a huge amount of evidence wagging right in my face—not being the brightest person in D.C.—to realize that in 2019 . . . the threats come primarily from companies, and not from the federal government." He could give examples. "All new Oreos have the label 'What's your pronoun?' A large American company is committing a pretty brazen act of propaganda aimed at your kids, and the message is that the binary gender scheme which we were taught in biology class in seventh grade is no longer operative." In fighting this, the libertarians would be worse than useless. Their response was, Yeah, well, if you don't like it, start your own Oreo company. "But that's not really an operative option in a world of monopoly power. . . . You can't create your own Google. . . . You have more power vested in fewer hands than at any time in American history. And that itself is ominous and should make all of us cast aside any thread of ideology or theology or whatever, just look at that straight in the face. Are you comfortable with that? You shouldn't be. Of course you're not. . . . They can make whole ideas disappear. And there's some evidence that they're working to do that."

For Tucker, Trump was a galactic tear in the universe, setting the terms of a new reality. Anything was possible. "If the Loch Ness monster exists, what about the yeti!" (Versailles laughter.) "The Trump election spurred in me a kind of reassessment of UFOs. I'm serious. And it turns out, like, they're real." (Laughter again.)

Tucker riled his audience a bit when he exposed his knowledge of the American left. He found bits to admire in Warren's "economic patriotism," and as long as the left kept quiet about the minorities and the migrants, some of them were promising candidates for a left-right nationalist pact. For this was Tucker's great insight: the social-democratic left was essentially right about economics. It would be good to nationalize social media; it would be

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good to boost American wages. The trouble with the left was that it wanted to do these things on behalf of an amorphous citizenry with no sense of boundaries for where American bounty should stop. We already knew who Americans were, Tucker implied; the definition was settled: Americans were people who watched and believed Tucker Carlson.

It did all raise a question. What if Trump had dialed down the white nationalism after taking the White House and, instead of betraying nearly every word of his campaign rhetoric of economic populism, had ruthlessly enacted populist policies, passing gargantuan infrastructure bills, shredding NAFTA instead of remodeling it, giving a tax cut to the lower middle class instead of the rich, and conspiring to raise the wages of American workers? It doesn't take much to imagine how that would play against a Democratic challenger with McKinsey of Harvard Law School imprinted on his or her forehead. There seemed to be two futures for Trumpism as a distinctive strain of populism: one in which the last reserves of white identity politics were mined until the cave collapsed and one in which the coalition was expanded to include working Americans, enlisting blacks and Hispanics and Asians in the cause of conquering the condescending citadels of Wokistan. Was it predestined that Trump would choose the former? Steve Bannon was already audience-testing Trumpism 2.0, wrong-footing the crowd at the Oxford Union with complaints about the lack of black technicians in Silicon Valley. Why couldn't Trumpism go in this direction in reality? The shrewdest move for the NatCons would surely have been to attract as many non-whites as possible to the Ritz and strike fear into the hearts of the globalists with a multiracial populist carnival—a new post-Trump pan-ethnic coalition that would someday consider it quaint that it had once needed to begin conferences with the profession: *We are not actually racist*.

For the rest of the afternoon, I wandered into talks and panels and discussions and cocktail chatter. On the floor I saw Daniel Pipes, the old right-winger and son of

the historian of the Russian Revolution Richard Pipes. "I think in the end my father was a social democrat," Pipes confessed to me in the tone of coming to terms with one's father having served in the Waffen-SS. He was scowly and solemn, and appeared like an Orthodox priest who had misplaced his thurible. He spent the afternoon on a panel defending Eastern European right-wing movements as "civilizationist" paladins, regarding their anti-Semitism more as growing pains than as an inherent feature of their ideology.

Among the other revelers in infamy was Amy Wax. Accompanying the Dark

THIS WAS TUCKER'S GREAT INSIGHT: THE SOCIAL-DEMOCRATIC LEFT WAS ESSENTIALLY RIGHT ABOUT ECONOMICS

Knight, I entered her talk in a small conference room, which she opened with a defense of Enoch Powell—a "prophet without honor in the last century." Yarvin was getting giddy off of Wax's denunciation of the "magic dirt" idea, which purports that immigrants are transformed by the U.S. soil into better people. "Oh my God, she's going for it—she's talking about 'magic dirt.' You know Powell was a brigadier in the army, right? Dude was super fucking tough!" Then Wax descended into a diatribe, calling out immigrants as littering noise polluters who did not meet the conditions of our society—in her own way repeating, in degraded English, the kind of view Henry James had once given voice to in a description of the Jewish ghetto of the Lower East Side: "Some vast sallow aquarium in which innumerable fish, of overdeveloped proboscis, were to bump together, forever, amid heaped soils of the sea."

Wax presented more than just a PR problem for the NatCons. In her encomium to the Berkshires and other clean, white places in America where she likes to spend time, she exposed one of the contradictions of the NatCons, setting their anti-elitist rhetoric against their elitist behavior. Of the

speakers at the conference, it was only the Notre Dame professor Patrick Deneen who argued with some cogency that the NatCons needed to foster new, local mini-aristocracies that would both keep the "c" of "conservatism" small—and not court big government all over again, as some of the NatCons clamoring for an industrial policy seemed to want. Awkwardly for Deneen's reputation, but less awkwardly for his bank account, Obama had read and liked his book *Why Liberalism Failed*.

In the bar, the Dark Knight and I found a table of older conservatives. There was Daniel Oliver, the one-time executive editor of *National Review* and a friend of Buckley and Burnham. We ordered a round of gin and tonics. The Dark Knight wanted to know about Burnham. "The most charming man," said Oliver. The American Revolution was the topic on the table. "You know, when the queen of England came for the Bicentennial to Boston, my great-uncle received her, since he was descended from the last line of Tory governors."

Yarvin launched into his Loyalist account of the American Revolution. He was incensed that the Whig interpretation had infected all of the historiography. "It's so sad that people believe that America won the war militarily, or that if the British had just conciliated more, they could have kept the colonies. I mean, the Whigs in England wanted to lose. They sent General Howe—a total radical—to fight the war. That's like sending Bill Ayers to lead the response to the Tet Offensive."

We discussed the coming attractions of the conference. "I'm thinking of organizing a boycott of John Bolton," joked William Ruger, the vice president for research at the Charles Koch Institute. Bolton was a persona not very grata among the NatCons. Recently anointed national security adviser, he was the sort of old guard Republican loyalist that many people at the conference loathed. "Bolton just loves war too much," said Ruger. "Never saw a war he didn't like."

In the corner of the Ritz bar, I saw Jennifer Schuessler of the *New York Times*. Trump was firing out tweets

against Ilhan Omar and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, telling them to go back to their countries. The mediasphere was saturated with outrage and glee. Schuessler was asking conference participants about the tweets, but no one was taking the bait. The NatCons treated her like a poor, uninitiated innocent. They performed looks of pity when she asked about the administration's actual record. Pushed on the Trump question, Hazony gave a supercilious smile that seemed to say, If you have to ask about tweets, you're never going to be ready for conversion.

In the evening there was a floor debate that pitted a representative of the pure free-market creed against the NatCon mutation. Richard Reinsch, a hale Indianan who worked for the Liberty Fund, which subsidizes the reprinting of Friedrich Hayek's works, faced off against Oren Cass, a young policy wonk from the Manhattan Institute. The question at hand: "Should America adopt an industrial policy?" Reinsch was perfectly orthodox in his defense of the status quo: "In real terms, growth in manufacturing has kept up with the growth of the economy over the previous seventy years," he told the ballroom. Its declining employment share was the result of increased productivity. "In 1980? Ten man-hours to make a ton of steel," Reinsch said. "In 2015? Two man-hours.... Even if manufacturing wages are on average higher than service-sector wages, it doesn't follow that tariffs will make more jobs that pay at the current manufacturing wage." The implication was politically clear: good luck trying to wean American workers off cheap products at Walmart. Oren Cass wanted to do something close to that. "We see slowing productivity growth," he said. "We see slow to non-existent wage growth. A male with a high school degree in 1970 could have supported a family of four at more than twice the poverty line; in 2016, he's only about thirty-five percent above it." Libertarians were trying to tie the government's hands too much, which was preventing U.S. participation in the worldwide competition of each nation protecting its own workers. "You can have free trade or you can have free markets, but you can't have both," said Cass, to the audience's delight.

In support of Cass, further speeches came from the floor. A voice from the South, J. D. Vance's, made a searing appeal in emotional tones. The author of *Hillbilly Elegy*, Vance was the bard of the NatCons, the most gifted lyricist of Trumpism. He was from Appalachia and had climbed his way into the elite hive of Yale Law School. "I'm a venture capitalist," he said. "If you're in the Peninsula, right off highway 101 there's an exit called Willow Road. And on Willow Road you'll find the Facebook headquarters. And at Facebook, there are neuroscientists currently being paid a lot of money quite literally to addict our children to their applications. And not far from the Facebook headquarters, there are neuroscientists working on how to cure dementia, and how to cure some of the most intractable diseases that affect our society. The people who are working at Facebook addicting our children to their applications make much more money than the people who are attempting to cure our society of its worst diseases, and I think this question about whether we should have an industrial policy ultimately reduces to the question of, Do you think our politics should have an answer about whether it is more valuable to cure our grandchildren than to addict them to terrible applications? And I think the answer is obviously yes."

There was mighty applause. Vance was followed by mini-Vances. A Young Republican from Texas spoke of the loss he feels in the west of his state, covered, he said, in "these beautiful storefronts that are empty." If Texas Republicans did not purge themselves of neoliberal tendencies, they'd eventually lose the state to Democrats, who were already refining the rhetoric of economic populism. A floor vote was taken, and Cass's side easily won. It was 99 in favor of a national industrial policy, 51 against.

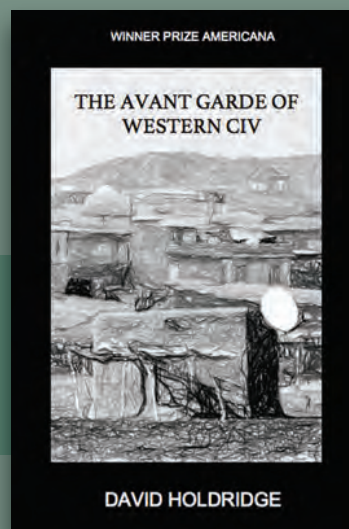
In the hot dark, walking back to my hotel, I nodded to Julius Krein, the thirty-three-year-old editor of *American Affairs*, the NatCon house journal. He was among the more serious of the instant intellectuals whom Trump's political arrival had spewed forth. Michael Anton, the most well-known "Trumpist intellectual," was a

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caricature of academic Straussianism by comparison: a man who rambled about Xenophon and whose speech at the NatCon conference sounded like a preface to a preface of a preface to a commentary on a commentary on a classical text. No, with his suit, neatly parted hair, and his flat Midwestern vowels, Krein appeared like a whiz kid from the Kennedy Administration. But in his style of argument, he was the closest thing that the NatCons had to a re-embodied James Burnham.

Like Burnham, Krein believed that both the left and the right had misidentified the radical agent in recent American history. It was not the devastated working class, as the left believed, which could barely find its feet politically; nor was it the 401(k)-holding American masses who kept the faith of market fundamentalism more than socialist-curious elites. For Krein, the war to win was *within* the elite. It was a question of who would exploit the amour propre of the professional-managerial class and enlist it in a battle against the top 1 percent—or top .1 percent. Up until this point, the billionaire class had operated in near perfect conditions, with a Democratic Party that swooned over them and a Republican Party that was so conveniently repulsive to the top 10 percent that it drew their energy away from revolutionary rumbles. Much as the Bernie Sanders strategists wondered about how many Warrenites they could attract to socialism before she embarked on an inevitable voyage back to the center, so Krein and his cadre wanted to make National Conservatism a viable alternative for a new, more politically responsible elite that would not shy from war with the globalists.

DAY THREE

When men of rank sacrifice all ideas of dignity to an ambition without a distinct object, and work with low instruments and for low ends, the whole composition becomes low and base.

—Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*

John Bolton arrived to a room of skeptics, but there was no walk-out. Civility persisted in the ballroom of the Ritz. In the face of at least

a few holdout enemies and a press corps visibly uncomfortable in his presence, Bolton showed that he was, after all, a professional operator. Here was a man who in law school had stayed up into the wee hours converting Clarence Thomas to conservatism (or so the rumor went).

One audience member tried to bait Bolton with a question about immigration in Europe: “Should we be worried about European birth levels?” But Bolton, sensing a trap, resisted this. He did not want to tell Europeans how many children they should have, nor Africans either. He wasn’t going to perform any symbolic allegiance to Trumpist themes. Instead, he bore down on the points he wanted to make to an audience that viewed him as oil in the water of Trump’s foreign policy. Venezuela might have to be occupied by the United States. Why? Well, it was already occupied by the Cubans. “If the 20,000 or more Cubans in Venezuela left tomorrow, the Maduro government would fall by midnight.” NATO nations needed to pay their fair share, just as Obama had said, though Trump had said it more forcefully. There was more continuity between the two administrations than the NatCons might like to acknowledge. Bolton was allergic to pandering and made no attempt to hide his addiction to American global supremacy and wars of choice. He was honest about his wish never to get clean.

In the coming months, the irony of Trump’s militarism would exceed the media’s capacity to comprehend it: Bolton, like James Mattis before him, was fired or resigned in view of what he thought of as an unacceptable troop withdrawal that Trump had committed to but did not actually undertake. In fact, Trump had doubled down on nearly every military theater in which the United States had troops.

At the back of the ballroom I spotted Keith Gessen, jotting down notes on Bolton’s remarks. It was strange to see him there, a literary figure of major standing in Brooklyn, a cofounder of *n+1*, the most successful leftist magazine of his generation. There was nothing doc-

trinaire about him; he was curious about the proceedings around him and ready to score the performances. “It’s impressive how Bolton just won’t let them get to him—he’s too experienced,” he said. “Some of these guys seem reasonable enough. J. D. Vance’s stuff about supporting working families—I mean, it’s not exactly bad what he’s saying.” Gessen was from Russian intelligentsia stock. When he read histories of the Revolution, he rooted for the Mensheviks, who lost every time. He had a natural affinity for the underdog, but he was put off by the NatCons’ pretensions, by their absurd miming of learnedness and by their you-must-break-eggs justifications of the Trump approach. “Must say that it remains one of the chief regrets of the time I spent in Washington D.C. this summer,” he would later write, “that I shook Michael Anton’s hand.”

There were a few people at the National Conservatism Conference of whom it was whispered: “Future president, right there.” It had been said of J. D. Vance, who managed to conjure a world that was almost palatable to liberals. Vance was careful about his gender roles, and even gave evidence that suggested he had experience changing diapers. It had been said of Tucker Carlson that he would be even better than Trump as a White House personality. But it was Josh Hawley over whom the crown most plausibly hovered. He was thirty-nine years old, the youngest man in the Senate, a former clerk for Justice John Roberts on the Supreme Court, and biographer (when in his twenties) of Teddy Roosevelt. Hawley was a scholar-warrior out of NatCon heaven. In presentation and style, he reminded me of the young Austrian leader Sebastian Kurz, who had made his name as the shiny new bridge to the authoritarians in Eastern Europe but who was still suave enough to appeal to Carinthian grandmothers.

I took my seat early at the dinner for Hawley. A recent convert to Mormonism was bad-mouthing the Supreme Court justices: Trump had to do better. “You really don’t like

Kavanaugh?" I asked her. "No, I mean Gorsuch. Have you read his decisions on Indians? He wants to give it all back to the Indians. Insidious rulings." Another law clerk was speculating about Ginsburg's physical health: "Amy Wax is a doctor and says that Ginsburg, even with all her exercise, will still be dead within two years, so it's looking good." The Dark Knight was trying to convince the table that the most important book to understand the moment was *The Final Pagan Generation* by Edward J. Watts, which is about how the last pagans in the Roman Empire had managed their lives in the upsurge of Christianity and how quickly their millennia-old culture had been pulverized by a small cadre of young, zealous Christian elite. This was the Dark Knight's persistent worry: Who were the true believers at the conference, and who were the opportunists?

Roosevelt could be an opportunist, Hawley writes in his biography of Teddy. "But he was no crass intellec-

tual opportunist." But what was Hawley? He came onto the stage in a more powerful thrust than had anyone at the conference so far, and his speech would be a summa of all that had come before. Like Thiel, he wanted to go to war on Big Tech (and he had introduced bills that showed he was serious); like Patrick Deneen, he was worried about how to create communities led by aristopopulists; like Tucker, he was fast on his feet and projected smiley confidence; but he could also compete with Hazony's boyish rocking back and forth between solemnity and mischief.

"The great divide of our time is not between Trump supporters and Trump opponents," Hawley intoned in a kind of grand-old-man oratory that seemed to conjure its own pulpit. "Or between suburban voters and rural ones, or between red America and blue America. No, the great divide of our time is between the political agenda of the leadership elite and the great and broad middle of our society.

And to answer the discontent of our time, we must end that divide. We must forge a new consensus. We must recover and renew the dream of the republic." He was getting more Roman every minute. Then he rounded on his enemy. "Call it the cosmopolitan consensus. On economics, this consensus favors globalization—closer and closer economic union, more immigration, more movement of capital, more trade, on whatever terms. The boundaries between America and the rest of the world should fade and eventually vanish. The goal is to build a global consumer economy, one that will provide an endless supply of cheap goods, most of them made with cheap labor overseas but funded by American dollars."

According to the cosmopolitan consensus, globalization was a moral imperative. The elites distrusted patriotism and "the common culture that was left to us by our forebears." What's more, they were happy to say as much for the record. A roll call of enemies of the people followed. MIT's

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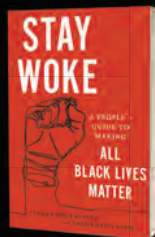
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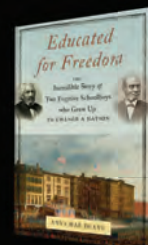
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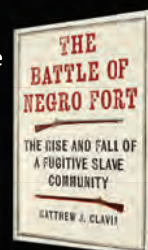
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INTRODUCTION BY
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Richard Sennett had denounced “the evil of shared national identity.” According to Martha Nussbaum, it was morally dangerous to teach students that they are “above all citizens of the United States.”

You would have never known from Hawley’s speech that there are cosmopolitans working at Starbucks and people who believe in socialism riding bikes for Grubhub. Yet it was still extraordinary to listen to the feat of rhetoric: a conservative slipping seamlessly back and forth between class-based attacks and cultural tirades, bashing the elite on class grounds, claiming again—as in the days of T.R. (and of Reagan)—that Republicans were on the side of the common man against a sequestered elite that had transformed the ivory tower into a great turret of the renewed culture war. My table was smitten with Hawley’s embroideries. Then Hawley dropped into the kind of national-unity speech that Obama used to do in his sleep.

For in the heart of our country, American strength has not failed. The kind of people who built this nation are here still, waking early and working late, manning the fire department and coaching the Little League, helping the neighbor who just lost a spouse, donating their gas money to a needy family halfway around the world.

And then the theme did become actually Roman. “I wonder if you remember the story of Horatius at the bridge,” Hawley said. “It happened in the early days of the Roman republic, sometime around 500 B.C. The Etruscan army, the story goes, marched on Rome to invade, and the Roman defenses were caught off guard. Eventually the fighting coalesced around a bridge leading across the Tiber into the city. All was chaos. The Roman generals, surprised and unsure, were falling back. The city seemed in great peril. But a junior officer named Horatius thought otherwise. He saw that if the Roman army could simply hold the bridge long enough for the city to reset its defenses, the republic could be saved. So as the senior officers retreated, he advanced. Macaulay tells us that as he charged to the front

line, Horatius glanced over his shoulder to the Roman hills and caught a glimpse of his own home there, and knew that it was worth defending. And so he took his stand. We know, with the benefit of history, that the Roman republic was still then quite young. Its most glorious days were still ahead. But Horatius didn’t—couldn’t—know that as he took up his position. He only knew that

To every man upon this earth
Death cometh soon or late;
And how can man die better
Than facing fearful odds,
For the ashes of his fathers
And the temples of his gods.

“Now we, too, need courage in our nation’s moment of need. Now we too need bravery born of love for the place we call home. For our republic is yet young, and our greatest days are yet unwritten—if we will stand.

“So let us stand together, let us stand for love of country and hearth and home, let us stand with the conviction of Horatius. For—

In yon strait path a thousand
May well be stopped by three:
Now who will stand on either hand,
And keep the bridge with me?

When Hawley had finished, everyone in the Ritz ballroom stood up. We were unified and collected. At my table there was still the lingering question of whether Hawley was an ideological freeloader—or the real deal.

The truth was that it was the wrong question. For Trump was doing tricky ideological lifting that went all but unappreciated by the NatCons. He fed the richest in society in the currency they prefer—dollars—and he fed his fans lower down with a temporarily effective substitute—recognition. It takes a certain talent to keep so much in the air. The Trumpists will survive the end of Trump, but they will also inherit Trump’s circus act. The dimmer NatCons aspire to sustain the performance; the more earnest want to slip an actual popular agenda into the mix. But when the time is ripe, the Grand Old Party will treat Trumpian idealism like any debt-ridden entity, selling it for what they can, once they’ve stripped it of its parts. ■