

Conclusion: *Ecce Furor*

There's something grander and bigger than liberalism, and that's to be seen in the philosophy of the ancients. Plato and Aristotle are the leaders, but there are a number of them. . . . I would describe what you learn from the ancients as learning how to live in the land of virtue, and the beauties and the difficulties of that land. . . . And liberalism knows essentially nothing of the land of virtue.

—HARVEY MANSFIELD, JULY 6, 2022

I. Mansfield at AEI

ON JULY 6, 2022, I had a front row seat for a quiet spectacle unfolding at the American Enterprise Institute, the conservative think tank in Washington, DC. I was there for an afternoon of panels organized in honor of Harvey C. Mansfield Jr.—idol to Michael Anton, advisor to Costin Alamariu, and one of the great American conservative professors of his generation. It was also a reunion of sorts for a good number of prominent Straussians after years of Covid-related isolation. The event had been organized by Yuval Levin and Bill Kristol, both of whom had been students of Mansfield at Harvard. Mansfield was sitting in the front row, too.

AEI is one of those places that feels overflowing with money: The building is gorgeous and the art is real. It had been over a decade since I had gone to conservative summer camp in Charlottesville, but the feeling here was basically the same. On the surface, the day's event was pleasant and contained, but anyone familiar with the people in attendance would have felt the simmering tensions, muted only by the esteem

enjoyed by the elderly honoree. Mansfield had recently turned ninety years old and had been teaching in Harvard's Department of Government for sixty years. That milestone inspired the celebration, where a dozen or so of his notable former students gathered to sing his praises. But the commemoration was also a rare moment that brought figures of the New Right, like Charles Kesler, in public contact with the other side—with the old establishment conservatism, including some, like Bill Kristol, from the neocon Never Trump camp.¹ In addition to Kesler, Peter Berkowitz was a panelist—another Straussian (and senior fellow at the Hoover Institute) who had served in the first Trump administration, as the director of policy planning in the State Department.² The air was thick with anticipation. What would be said, by whom? Would tempers flare? And that is only to mention the controversies that were likely of interest to those who had chosen to attend. Harvey Mansfield, after all, was a controversial figure in his own right.³

Critics would have been amused but unsurprised by the constitution of the audience: Nearly all white, overwhelmingly male, and with a strong showing from young Republicans in navy blazers and khakis. They would perhaps have been entertained by the sight of ninety-year-old Harvey periodically nodding off during the proceedings, supported by his “spectacular” (his word) third wife Anna.⁴ Even so, the overall mood was one of scholarly gravitas, as well as of respect and gratitude for a wonderful teacher. During some of the talks, I felt a wash of recognition for my younger, more Straussian self—and for the part of me that still just loves this stuff and always will.

The second panel was the one to watch for anyone interested in contemporary American politics. The panel was ostensibly devoted to “Tocqueville and America,” but it pitted the two Trump advocates, Kesler and Berkowitz, against two critics, Bryan Garsten of Yale University and Yuval Levin of AEI (with Levin acting as moderator). Kristol had introduced the first panel of the day. When it came time for this one, he left the room.

The panelists hewed mainly to the Tocquevillian theme, but in a quiet and tactful way Yale's Garsten confronted Kesler. He used his time not only to praise Mansfield, but also to raise big Lincolnian questions about the preservation of American institutions. Garsten reminded the

audience that the problem of conservative populism in America was not new, noting how Mansfield was someone who used to offer loud warnings about its dangers.⁵ Garsten summarized the warning: “It’s a dangerous game to try to ride the tiger,” he said. “You might end up inside it.” He added: “Are we going to be overcome by the democratic impatience with forms and formalities so much so that constitutionalism as a source of conservatism gets put aside?”⁶

Garsten did not mention Trump or Trumpism, but the source of his concern was obvious, and during the Q&A he faced pushback from Kesler, who suggested that Trump “in a way” represented a “democratic upsurge” that had happened because “the old constitution . . . had fallen into a certain kind of disrepair, or even deliberate diminishment and abandonment.” Kesler argued that the populism was partly “proconstitutional, even though it takes an angry form in many cases.” This was a rehash of *The Crisis of the Two Constitutions*—a book that replicated the same Manicheanism, in more genteel form, of “charge the cockpit or you die” and “the hour is late” Red Caesarism.

Each group of the MAGA New Right that we have been concerned with in this book offered a full slate of positions—spanning from Kesleresque refinement to Kevin Slack’s reckless vulgarity—but each camp worked toward its own hard restorationists’s vision of the future. The Claremonters said they wanted a return to the vision of the founders—a small-government Republican vision that respects traditional religion, manly statesmanship, self-government, and federalism. If that didn’t work, then Red Caesarism would have to do. The National Conservatives sought to protect the true American nation—a Christian, mostly white, socially conservative nation, and one where the hordes of woke neo-Marxists would be defeated for good. For the American Postliberals and Catholic integralists, the ultimate endgame was spiritual; the secularist enemies would be defeated for the sake of the common good, which included orderly hierarchical politics, economic melioration, and the soul’s salvation. The Hard Right wanted to smash the liberal status quo, come what may.

There was significant variation between the New Right modes, but in each instance, what we saw was a group of theoretically-minded

people who turned into, or always were, ideologues fighting an existential battle against liberal democratic pluralism and its freedoms.

Each of these Ideas First visions refused to contend honestly with the realities of historical change and contemporary pluralism. But change and pluralism were real, and many people supported the transformation. Which meant that the New Right would require an authoritarian turn. Many were willing to take that risk, and it certainly helped that they were so caught up in their own ideas, so “high on their own supply.” They had, one after another, become like G. K. Chesterton’s madman.

“If you argue with a madman,” the English critic wrote, “it is extremely probable that you will get the worst of it; for in many ways his mind moves all the quicker for not being delayed by the things that go with good judgment.” The madman is not held back by a sense of humor, or by charity, or even by reality and the “dumb certainties of experience.” Chesterton concludes: “He is the more logical for losing certain sane affections. Indeed, the common phrase for insanity is in this respect a misleading one. The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason.”⁷ The MAGA New Right was full of madmen like this, who were also angry, who then got a taste of power and influence, too.

At the Mansfield event at AEI, Kesler’s argument was staked on the doubtful proposition that the aims of “progressive constitutionalism” are altogether different from those of the founders’ constitution—and, furthermore, that brazen, Trump-style political means could serve genuinely restorative, constitutional ends. In his final response to Kesler, Garsten probed further: “Under what conditions [could] populism be expected to generate a new appreciation for constitutionalism? Or does it create habits and practices that will, in the end, do just the reverse? In other words, to what extent can we separate means and ends? Can we have that [populist] style of politics and hope that it leads us to a very different style of politics at some point in the future?” I do not take these to be merely rhetorical questions, and I don’t think he did either. But Garsten’s questioning pointed to just how tenuous Kesler’s claims were in the case of Trump, given his dubious character, his demagoguery and vengefulness, and his plain disinterest in democracy, constitutionalism, and bridging divides.

To speak in a more classical idiom: you would need a more magnanimous, great-souled person to achieve what Kesler had hoped for from Trump.

But the Mansfield fête was never going to be the place for *thymotic* fireworks, and that was the extent of the confrontation between Kesler and Garsten. When Mansfield himself took to the podium at the end of that July afternoon, he made his little speech about conservative isles of virtue, took a few more formulaic swipes against liberals and liberalism, and concluded with a petty jab against Obama (for his ambition and “senseless assertiveness”). I have seldom been so glad to no longer be part of something as when I walked out of the AEI building and into the DC sunshine that day.

II. NatCon 4

If AEI was the Superego of right-wing intellectualism in the early 2020s, NatCon was the Ego and angry Id. Two years later, on July 8, 2024, I went back to that part of DC, just a few blocks north of the White House and about a half mile away from AEI to the Capital Hilton hotel, hoping to get into NatCon 4. We had recently moved back to DC by this point, so it was just a trip across town. I went with my friend Jerome.

This iteration of the conference boasted six US senators on the roster of speakers, with Josh Hawley and JD Vance set to give keynotes.⁸ Steve Bannon had originally been listed but then had to report to prison. The NatCon group seemed to have consolidated institutional support in DC, as well as with partners like Hungary’s Danube Institute. And though Peter Thiel was off the donor’s list, the Heritage Foundation, Jim DeMint’s Conservative Partnership Institute, and Thomas Klingenstein were all still listed as big donors, with the Claremont Institute, Hillsdale College, and other smaller groups on the program now, too.⁹ A major new theme of the conference (in addition to surefire hits like “Big Tech and Big Porn,” “Separation of Church and State Has Failed,” and “Corporations Against Conservatism”) was “Lawfare: The Criminalization of Politics.” That panel included John Yoo, author of the so-called Bush Torture Memos, and John Eastman, who gave a talk on “Living in the

Shadow of Lawfare.”¹⁰ Chris DeMuth opened the conference with a pointed declaration: “Welcome to the mainstream!” Hawley concluded the day by declaring himself a Christian Nationalist: “Some will say now I am calling America a Christian nation—and so I am. Some will say I’m advocating Christian nationalism—and so I do. . . . My question is, is there any other kind worth having?”¹¹ Douglas Wilson—the theologian from Moscow, Idaho—was a new addition to the NatCon roster. A young writer named Mana Afsari wrote about NatCon 4 and said that “everyone, young and old, was dressed to the nines.” She noted that Curtis Yarvin was in attendance, too.¹²

National Conservatism, which began as a group of Trump-supporting misfits, was now the heart of the party. And beyond the bevy of American senators, there were also representatives from across the foreign far right: several constituents from the recently defeated Tory Party in Britain; a substantial delegation from Modi’s India; the expatriate crown prince of Iran, Reza Pahlavi; Gladden Pappin and Balázs Orbán from Hungary; and Ryszard Legutko of Poland, who was there to receive an award.

Among the speakers, the fringeest contingent this time around included Paul Gottfried, Jonathan Keeperman (aka L0m3z), and Jack Posobiec, whose speech was titled “This Year We Can Save Western Civilization.”¹³ Posobiec had taken to calling the left “Unhumans,” and he published a book by that title with War Room Books the day before he spoke at the conference. Vance provided a blurb for the book.¹⁴

David Azerrad of Hillsdale College was allotted time to speak and took advantage of it in a speech called “Enemies of the State: The Left’s Schmittian Politics.” Azerrad, who was originally from Montreal and whom I knew from my time in Texas (he did his PhD at the University of Dallas with some of my Alberta friends), had become a far-right provocateur, happy to denounce all the left as the enemy; in 2023 he denounced Martin Luther King in Paul Gottfried’s *Chronicles* magazine.¹⁵ At NatCon, he channeled a younger Mansfield (or perhaps Senator Hawley, who had recently released a book on *Manhood*): “America has always been manly. We took on the Red Coats, tamed the West, won two World Wars and put a man on the moon. Manliness is as American

as apple pie. And I would say to all of you: What does it say about the failure of the right to engage on this issue that young men need to turn for manly advice to a scumbag like Andrew Tate, who's currently awaiting trial for human trafficking and rape charges?"

This pearl-clutching about Tate struck me as droll. The rest of Azerrad's performance involved, in the words of journalists Annika Brockschmidt and Ben Lorber, "an unabashedly White nationalist and male supremacist speech, for which he received one of the only standing ovations at the conference."¹⁶

I was not in attendance for Azerrad's or anyone else's NatCon speeches. I tried to get a press pass but was turned away. I offered to pay and they said no. When I showed up in person that Monday morning, they gallantly shepherded me over to the ladies' line (that was a conference first; the line was short)—but then the director of the conference confirmed that I was not getting in. Jerome and some other friends were admitted. I spent a bit of time in the hotel lobby, headed home, and watched some of the talks online later. There are worse things than not attending NatCon.

III. Masculinist Furies

Only the real political junkies were paying attention to NatCon 4, which was also held during the same week as the NATO summit and right before the GOP convention. It was a strange time in the United States—or that's how it seemed to me in the thick of the hot DC summer. President Biden had had a catastrophic debate performance in June that left Democrats and many others feeling desperate and anxious, and there was no end in sight to the campaign's relentless, exhausting, drip drip drip stagnation. If Aristotle was right that pity and fear together are two of the key ingredients to tragedy, then it is fair to say that I, at least, was in a tragic mood, feeling both pity and fear acutely, and for the country at large. And in the narrative that was brewing in my mind, the men of the New Right had crystallized into something like the ancient Greek Furies—only with the gender dynamics inverted, or perhaps dressed in drag. It was an image that, once it came, I could not shake. So

much of what happened on the New Right was so excruciatingly performative and online, and yet also visceral and raw. So much of it had to do with masculinity, and the masculinist furies clearly had the upper hand against a campaign like Biden's.

The Furies, or Erinyes (sometimes euphemized as the *Eumenides*, or “kindly ones”), were ancient goddesses of vengeance, who upheld ancient curses and old forms of justice—hounding anyone who acted with ingratitude or insolence, especially toward their parents or blood relatives. In Greek mythology and Athenian theater, they represented the earthly chthonic gods—the world of the old laws, to them—and were often embattled with the newer and younger gods of Olympus. Aeschylus ties them emotionally to Clytemnestra and the anguished women of Mycenae whose husbands had been away at war for so long. And while the Furies were spiritually reactionary, they weren't without their charms, because they spoke for abiding human things: the desire for hard justice, the need for common sense and respect, and the need for not all things to change. The Olympian gods, for their part, were a mixed bag: some fickle, some cruel, some wise, some mischievous. More progressive, a bit flighty and out of touch. More like liberals.

In the third play of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*—the only extant tragic trilogy from ancient Greece, beloved by Bobby Kennedy—the Furies form the play's wretched chorus and together haunt the protagonist, Orestes. Orestes is the son of the king and hero Agamemnon and queen Clytemnestra, and he has just avenged his father's murder by slaying the queen, thereby feeding into a generational cycle of violence. At one point he wavers, Hamlet-like, but he goes ahead with the matricide, spurred on by the god Apollo. The Furies swoop in fast and are unforgiving. They take the side of women, domesticity, and daughters in the binary world that the plays explore, haunting and tormenting Orestes because mother-killing is just so deeply wrong. They do not care that he had his reasons. They just chase him down, full of rage and hate, out for blood on behalf of the dead queen and the mother-child bond.

The masculinist Furies of the twenty-first century, with their anger, their reactionary values, and their all-or-nothing takes, found a

comfortable home on the American New Right. Many ancient themes were being made explicit, as in Reno's *Return of the Gods* and the newly open embrace of Christian nationalism; at NatCon 4 there was much excitement about laws dictating the display of the Ten Commandments in public schools. The GOP as defined by Trump and Trumpism wanted badly to represent men and MAGA masculinity—from PUA-obsessed Michael Anton and Manosphere anons like Raw Egg Nationalist, to Josh Hawley and Brett Kavanaugh—and even to hound and chase out women from public life. The right's *thymotic* chest-thumping lined up with popular culture—from Jordan Peterson's lobsters to Johnny Depp's online hordes—and together they formed a living mirror to the old Furies' raging laments. By 2024 masculinist fervor come to saturate the movement.

In the strange corners of the culture war that I was watching, this newly rekindled gender struggle had a bizarre peak just prior to the publication of a new translation of Homer's *Iliad*, in 2023.¹⁷ This was not just any new translation; rather, it was Emily Wilson's translation, and Wilson's *Odyssey*, from 2018, was the first major translation of that book into English by a woman.¹⁸ The *Odyssey* translation was a bestseller and a major event in the publishing world, and Wilson gained a kind of mythic stature in the (normie, liberal) reading public. One might have expected the Bronze Agers to have been pleased to see Homer getting so much attention. I loved Wilson's *Odyssey* for its quick pace and simple elegance, but the Wilson translations made the men of the Hard Right mad. In 2022 a group of them decided that Wilson represented the Longhouse and everything "gynocracy," and they presumed that Homer shared in their prejudices, too. *IM-1776* published a piece titled "Homer's Brazen Vandalizers: How Female Academics are ruining the Classics" by a man named Abdullah Yousef; it argued that Homer portrayed the famously wily Odysseus as an unquestionable and simply inspiring hero.¹⁹ In April 2023, ahead of the publication of Wilson's *Iliad*, Yousef led the charge once more. "Seeing a lot of morons talk about Homer again, so just to repeat: there's an active agenda, predominantly through neutered and effeminate translation and re-writing, to reinterpret all classical works as never disturbing the false holiness of the gynocratic world of today." A few months later, a man named Max Meyer attempted

to dissect Wilson's translations based on his single year of ancient Greek in college.²⁰ His thread went viral and gained nearly three million views.

It is hard to overstate the idiocy of these attacks, which, in addition to their ugly treatment of Wilson, reduced Homer to a machismo-propagating hack. Yousef and Meyer wrote as though Homer never questioned heroic valor, even though almost the whole power and beauty of the Homeric poetry consists in its throttling ambiguity about themes like war, honor, manly virtue, and mortality.

Emily Wilson published her *Iliad* in September 2023, but the misogyny of the New Right never abated. At NatCon 4 it was expressed in what the writer Sarah Jones called "an explicit obsession with white Christian fertility, which consumes the speakers and animates the crowd perhaps more than any other subject."²¹ None of it should have been surprising. From the very start, Trumpism involved open boasting or worse about pussy-grabbing; it turned into a violent effort to overturn a democratic election; in some quarters—like its academic conferences—it encouraged training with AR-15s to intimidate fellow citizens at public libraries.

IV. Summer Reversals

The fury of the New Right was on full display when a young man tried to assassinate Donald Trump at a campaign rally in Pennsylvania on July 13, 2024, just a week or so after NatCon. A local man, Corey Comperatore, was killed. I obviously do not mean to blame the New Right for the gunman (who was a registered Republican and clearly deranged, but whose motives were unclear). But I do mean to recall Trump's defiant response, and that of his followers: After being forced to the ground by his Secret Service members, Trump rose to his feet with his fist raised, enraged, and yelled "FIGHT!" The scene, skillfully captured by photographers, offered the perfect distillation of the movement's macho energy. In the immediate aftermath, this *thymos* coursed through the (online) body politic, and Trump's status soared. On X, Elon Musk endorsed Trump within the hour and declared, "Last time America had a candidate this tough was Theodore Roosevelt." Sohrab Ahmari went further:

“I’ll be honest: If a bullet grazed my ear, I would not have it in me to get up, pump my fist, and urge my supporters to ‘fight’! That’s evidence of a truly extraordinary man. World-historical in the way Napoleon was for the 19th century.”²² Stephen Wolfe said that the photo captured “courage and victory” such that “a new possibility of being has opened before young men.” He concluded: “The future is rightwing.”²³ Within days the online right was blaming diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives for the attack, since some of the agents on site that day were women, and so was the head of the Secret Service at the time.²⁴ Ahmari asserted: “That footage of the overweight Secret Service agent struggling to re-holster her pistol is yet another everything-is-broken moment.”²⁵ Even Trump did not sink that low.

The attempt on Trump’s life set off a dynamic few weeks in American history, full of reversals and upsets. That same week, on July 15, Trump announced that Senator JD Vance would be his running mate. It was a bold choice that seemed designed to please the New Right, since Vance had been a darling of the movement from its earliest days, and a fixture in New Right spaces of all kinds. Vance, who published his memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* in June 2016, converted to Catholicism in 2019 (the same year he converted to Trumpism) and was ideologically closest to Post-liberal thinkers like Deneen and Vermeule. He was a speaker at Deneen’s book launch for *Regime Change* and has cited him as an intellectual influence. Peter Thiel was his mentor and financial backer, and he was on the record as a supporter of Viktor Orbán. But unlike Deneen and Vermeule, and more like Thiel, Vance never kept his distance from the New Right’s more activist and imprudent expressions. He went to the Nat-Con conferences. He gave speeches at Claremont Institute events. He appeared on niche podcasts like *Jack Murphy Live* and the *American Moment*, where he made claims that harmonized with Hard Right positions on everything from getting red-pilled for Trump and Claremont-style “hour-is-lateism,” to the misery of modern professional women. The phrase that caught the country’s imagination, about how the country was run by “a bunch of childless cat ladies who are miserable at their own lives . . . and so they want to make the rest of the country miserable, too,” revealed Vance’s saturation in New Right thinking. The line, and

others that Vance used, might as well have come from *Bronze Age Mindset* or *The Case for Christian Nationalism*.²⁶

On July 21, 2024, Joe Biden withdrew as presidential candidate, and Vice President Harris gained the nomination soon after. Suddenly, the gender dynamics of the campaign were transformed, and Vance's culture-warrior style seemed, briefly, like a liability. Harris asked Minnesota governor Tim Walz to be her running mate. With his working-class background, modest career as coach and teacher, and easy demeanor, Walz drew a dramatic contrast with Vance.

Vance seemed to get more frustrated by the day. Soon after the Walz announcement, he and his mostly male staff—clearly in a performative mood—approached Harris's official plane, Air Force Two, on a tarmac in Wisconsin. He did not end up confronting or even speaking to the vice president but did post a photo on X about the stunt, joking, "This Entourage reboot is going to be awesome."²⁷ At a press conference in Michigan later that day, Charlie Langton of Fox News questioned him: "You've been criticized for being a little too serious, even angry sometimes," he began. "What makes you smile? What makes you happy?" Vance replied that, while he was enjoying himself on the campaign trail, he was also "angry about what Kamala Harris has done to this country and done to the American southern border." He said that "what's going on in this country is a disgrace" and that "both things can be true. I think most Americans can joke around and [be] pissed off about the direction of this country."²⁸ By the end of the summer, Vance and Trump were spreading gross conspiracies about Haitian migrants in Springfield, Ohio—Vance's own district—leading to bomb threats and closures in the community.²⁹ "If I have to create stories so that the American media actually pays attention to the suffering of the American people, then that's what I'm going to do," the senator said.³⁰

I guess it's what they call a noble lie.

But Trump and Vance were offering something politically effective, and even the writers at *The New York Times* agreed that Vance outshone Governor Walz during their debate.³¹ Soon Vance got to step onto the Air Force Two plane as vice president of the United States.

V. Absentee Goddess

In hindsight, the summer of 2024 looks like the flubbed *deus ex machina* moment in our collective history: the moment where the pod bros and George Clooney and Nancy Pelosi, like the Goddess Athena in Aeschylus, took noble action on behalf of democracy, forced Biden out, and tried to save the day.³² But it didn't work. The switch to Harris offered a brief reprieve from the tragic gloom, but the forces at play were beyond what the liberals were equipped for. By the end of the campaign—if not long before—liberals like me were angry, too. Angry about Biden's decision to run again, and about the Democratic Party's failure to run a proper primary, which felt like a huge slap in the face for anyone who believes in democracy. Angry about the party's approach to inflation and the cost of groceries—which amounted to little more than denial. Angry about Biden's unfettered support for Israel and the war in Gaza. Angry about Elon Musk. Angry about cloying campaign ads featuring, for example, Julia Roberts reminding women that their ballots were secret (GOP women were clearly in the thrall of their wife-beater husbands, the ad implied).³³

The outcome of the election did not help temper any of that rage.

Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy includes a true *deus ex machina*, and culminates in something like a paean to democratic Athens. The political hero of the play is the goddess Athena, who resolves Orestes's tragic contest with the Furies by setting up the first major trial by jury in Athens. The tone here is very contemporary: Democratic processes to the rescue! After some good civics lessons—and terrible legal arguments—the vote is split. Athena gets the deciding vote, and she, the goddess of wisdom, tips the scales in favor of Orestes, which is also a vote for Apollo and his sophistry, and for Athens's masculinist, rationalistic politics.³⁴ And so, while there is relief for Orestes, the Furies lose, and it seems that mother-murder will go unavenged. The goddesses are poised to slink away back to the netherworlds to tend their festering wounds. But that is not how it ends up. Instead, Athena's final, drawn-out gesture is to try to assuage the angry Furies—an acknowledgment of the ignominies they have endured. The only thing that saves the final play from

devolving into total rah-rah jingoism, besides the gravitas of all that came before, is Athena's gentleness: "You do still have your rights. . . . Soothe down the seething storm-waves of your rage."³⁵

Athena offers the Furies a new perch in the city: "You shall have / a cavern-dwelling in this land, where you shall take / your seats on glistening stones beside your altars, / and receive due worship from these citizens." They are given recognition, and a modicum of dignity—honored properly as deities of marriage and family, receiving the "first fruits of the fertile Athenian land" as sacrifices. Athena beseeches the citizens "You should always treat these kind ones / kindly and respect them: that way / you shall keep your land and city / glorious in the ways of justice."³⁶

From 2016 to 2024 the psychodramatic landscape in America was an almost perfect reversal of the *Oresteia* with respect to gender and who represents the old and the new—and, of course, with regards to who won out in the end. In our story, after the 2024 election, the masculinist furies prevailed, ready for vengeance, and no bright-eyed Athena appeared to vote them down, offer peace, or bind up the nation's wounds. Our lessons are more brutal, and we will have to forge our own way.

VI. Whose Renaissance?

The election of Trump in 2016 began to reveal just how much we liberals had taken for granted, and just how fragile our understandings of the world had been. In 2017 the philosopher Charles Mills wrote of an "aggressively resurgent anti-Enlightenment, which bears some affinities to traditional conservatism and the nineteenth-century counter-Enlightenment but is now more explicitly racialized than before." He continued: "So this is no longer a time when self-styled post-Enlightenment critics—taking for granted liberal-democratic guarantees—can afford to be sneering at Enlightenment norms. The protections of those rights and freedoms can no longer be assumed." Since then (and sadly since Mills's death in 2021), the illiberal right's renaissance has only grown in scope, power, and counterrevolutionary extremism. By 2024, the New Right obviously could no longer be ignored.

Yet still liberals were caught off-guard. In January 2024, Constanze Stelzenmüller described how liberal rationalism and modernism had become a genuine liability to America's leaders in the Democratic Party. She wrote of the Biden team's hyperrationalism, and of their "precise and nuanced analysis of the dynamics of global strategic linkages and interdependencies." The downside to all the expertise was that these wonkish, hypercompetent elites "had no answers—no feeling, even—for the seemingly archaic aspects of politics. Anger, hatred, enmity: these are its blind spots," she wrote.³⁷ The early months of the second Trump administration further illuminated this mass failure of liberal psychology and moral imagination: We wouldn't know the furies if they were knocking down our own front doors. And then suddenly they were.

In February 2025, as Elon Musk and his Department of Government Efficiency set out to purge and replace the federal government, Patrick Deneen delivered the *First Things* Inaugural Neuhaus Lecture at New College, Florida. It was emblematic of the New Right's antimodern radicalism. "I think the most urgent question for us to explore today," he concluded, "is the possibility that we must think through and assist in developing a fourth wave of modernity." This new "truly postliberal age" would be "made not of the salty waters of liberal modernity but refreshed, and perhaps even replaced, with the purer waters of premodernity, our classical and Christian heritage."³⁸

Even as Musk did his worst, much of America did not even seem awake to the possibility that Deneen was describing. If I'm right that the New Right puts Ideas First, liberals and the Democrats seem to put them last—having incubated them in an AI lab, tested them against a dozen polls, and assigned them to a celebrity to rehearse. This means that Trump's second big win was also a failure of leadership and principle among liberals; in the end, of course, ideas and principles do matter a great deal, and we need good ones to prevail. One of the most frustrating experiences for any liberal observer of the New Right was to witness, again and again, the incredible contrast between the coarse brazenness of its ideologues and the tepid intellectual reserve (and cluelessness, and cowardice) of so many

centrist and liberal leaders, both within academia and beyond. Of course there are exceptions, but not nearly enough.

So what is to be done? What might an Athena for our own age have to say?

In the short term, it is clear that Americans who oppose Trump and the New Right will have to keep engaging and pushing back however they can, and as their circumstances allow—in protests, civil actions, and lawsuits, running for election at every level, and putting pressure on Congress to restore their own authority in our constitutional order.

In the longer term, and on the theoretical plane, let me venture that, contra Deneen’s “purer waters of premodernity,” our era calls for liberal renaissance and reinvention. Some of the academic work here is well underway.³⁹ But most of it isn’t academic work; it’s political and practical work that involves, as Arendt said, “thinking what we are doing,” talking to one another, and acting together in the world. Not everyone is going to do this the same way, but it should be done with courage and ethical resolve.

When a ninety-year-old Harvey Mansfield told the audience at AEI that “liberalism knows essentially nothing of the land of virtue,” he was wrong, but it is not hard to understand why he said it. Liberalism was invented in part to sidestep and quell the flames of ideological fanaticism. Partly as a result of that history, liberals have for far too long accepted a minimalist self-understanding that avoids all talk of virtue and ethical vision; they have similarly refused to acknowledge and cultivate the moral worlds and traditions that sustain our lives. This is understandable, but it is time to do better: to step up, have a bit of ambition, and admit that liberalism could be something wonderful, and in truth it already is. If you look around the modern liberal world—even at Harvard—you will encounter talented, courageous, and truth-telling liberal people everywhere. It is also true that liberals do not always speak fluidly about the Aristotelian mean, the tripartite soul, Machiavelian *virtù*, or secret esoteric gardens. Oh well. People are allowed to have other loves and love languages, other ideas about the good, the true, the beautiful, about being human, and being alive. Part of the work of the liberal renaissance is to make these facts plain.

The reimagining will also require that liberals become more upfront about the core ideas and ideals of liberalism: about what liberalism values and why, in language that can be broadly understood. To borrow from someone we have come to know in these pages:

The best way to counter the degradations of American institutional life is to remind the public of the fundamental purpose of those institutions, and to communicate that purpose. What is the purpose of the university? What is the purpose of a school? What system of government will guide us toward human happiness? These questions provoke doubt and anxiety in the current regime. And no wonder. The idea of happiness, properly understood, can be revolutionary.⁴⁰

It was Christopher Rufo who said that, and it's true. The difference between a liberal outlook and that of Rufo, though, is that liberal purposes (and liberal happiness) will always be plural and messy: more Mardi Gras or renaissance fair than country club gala or debutante ball. But if liberals cannot both articulate and fight in solidarity for our aspirations—what we value and live and work for, our visions for individual and collective happiness, and our beliefs and programs for what is right and fair—then why should anyone else do it for us? They will not. And there will always be plenty of people eager to impose their order on us, or willing to send us careening back into premodernity—and not just its “purer waters,” but also its storms of ideological conflict and bloody strife.

To the antiliberals and others on the Postliberal right who say that we are already there, that liberal tyranny and oppression is already mainstream, I say: You have lost your way and should walk with more care. You take the liberal world for granted, too. This has allowed you to don the language of grievance and oppression far too lightly, without having given enough thought to what oppression actually means—the kind of oppression that doesn't let you love who you want to, or vote in free elections, or not be disappeared. It is unseemly, and it is unmanly, and some of you will miss your liberalism when it's gone.

To liberals and progressives, the message has to be different, because the problems are different. They have to do less with gross state violence

and disregard for human decency and more to do with what Jonathan Rauch has called “coercive conformity” or what Tocqueville called “soft despotism.” It is not a general problem but a rather narrow one having mainly to do with insular academics and elites. Whatever we call it, when it comes to this subset, conservatives who complain about liberal intolerance have a point. If deep moral pluralism is to be a modern liberal aspiration—and I think it must be—then all liberals must cultivate a hardened but steadfast toleration for worldviews that we find incomprehensible, deeply offensive, or dangerous. We do not have to like it, and we do not have to be sweet—as Sarah Schulman has written, “conflict is not abuse”—but we must do it, as a matter of intellectual integrity, a guard against the tyrannical drives that lurk within, and a pledge of humility and hope for a truly diverse future.⁴¹ Maximal accommodation for different outlooks should be our watchword; curiosity is a good one, too.

In that vein, there are many things to be learned from the New Right. If I were to play Athena in the unfolding drama of our age, and was in a magnanimous mood, I would ask Americans to think about the ways in which the New Right intellectuals have succeeded in shaking up the status quo—on economics, trade, localism, technocracy and managerialism, campus silos and campus bureaucracies, and the crisis of masculinity to which the entire New Right movement is such a loud testament. These are all areas where Americans could learn from one another across political divides, and in some cases they already have. The mistake here would not be listening too much; it would be to fall for the New Right’s Schmittian filth about friends and enemies and America being irreparably divided.

As Athena, I might also recommend some aspects of Patrick Deneen’s “mixed constitutionalism.” Deneen’s ideas about liberalism are bogus, but some of his ideas about mixing up the American social order are good: moving some federal agencies from DC to other parts of the country, for example, or finding other ways to reinvigorate places that are struggling.⁴² I also agree with Deneen that it is “high time to revisit the question of national service.” This would not just involve military service but could also mean giving people opportunities to work on

infrastructure projects, environmental repair, and social services. Think the Civilian Conservation Corps—the goal being, in Deneen’s words, “the mingling of people from a variety of walks of life.”⁴³ Deneen also supports increased funding for public schools, with much more support for education in the trades. Amen to that. Let’s add a big child tax credit—for all children, in all kinds of families—to the list. We could tax the billionaires and millionaires to make it happen. Sohrab Ahmari’s ideas about unions and workers sound good, too. Athena knows there is no shortage of other interesting policy ideas in the center and on the left. When it comes to inequality, poverty, and the shrinking middle class, what are lacking are ambition and will.

As magnanimous Athena, I would also take a “patriotic education” page out of the New Right handbook. I would propose a hybrid version of it—traditional and woke—in K–12 education, something like the Hillsdale Curriculum meets the authors of 1619. States, educators, and parent groups would be charged with sorting out the details for their own regions, schools, and kids. It would inspire real patriotism to see these matters hashed out in town halls everywhere. Imagine if America could do something collective to elevate the profession of the teacher.

As for higher education, I would tear up the patriotic education page and instead promote history, great books, and liberal humanism, broadly conceived—not as a replacement but as a well-funded alternative option to what dominates already (i.e., STEM and preprofessional specialization). I would commit to building new liberal education programs in big state schools all over the country, with a genuinely pluralistic, aka “mixed,” character. The purposes here would be mainly old-fashioned and Socratic. The initiatives would ensure exposure to fine works of art, literature, and history and would treat questions—What is justice? What is love? What does it mean to live well?—as foundational. But this new liberal education would also recognize that politics and activism are legitimate concerns for young people, as is religion. Such an education would necessarily vary widely from region to region. As Athena, I wouldn’t dictate the curriculum or allow state legislatures to touch it. I would insist that faculty do that work, and I would pay them well to do it. Would such programs duplicate what universities

already do in some instances? Oh yes. But I still suspect that, if it were done well, there would be no shortage of faculty to hire, nor of students to enroll.

You don't have to be a goddess to see that everything about this style of education could serve as a rampart against some of our most urgent problems, from spiritual malaise and masculinist charlatans to cutthroat careerism and the onslaught of AI.

The programs I have described are hardly unprecedented. Bryan Garsten has initiated a nonpartisan civics programs at Yale that is worth imitating, and between 2016 and 2024, major new public civics initiatives were started in red states all over the country.⁴⁴ These latter were all, so far as I could tell, directed by white men, and some of the programs had an insular partisan or reactionary bent, but they were a boon to humanities hiring. As part of my own Olympian strategy, I would aim for something better, though—a modern humanistic renaissance, where young people could get out of their silos and cocoons and have the chance to be broadly and richly educated. As an olive branch to the right, I would ask conservatives, including those discussed in this book (well, except a few) to direct the programs. I would make these new perches contingent, however, on their sharing leadership with a woman academic (or woke neo-Marxist) for the duration of their tenure. All this would doubtless initiate a cycle of hiring and curricular battles the likes of which, even in America, we have never seen. At one school they would read *The Federalist* and Annette Gordon-Reed; at another, James Baldwin and Hannah Arendt. As Athena, I'd push for Homer and the Bible everywhere. Wouldn't it be grand?

VII. Interregnum

The *Oresteia* won first prize at the City Dionysia in 458 BCE. It was the Golden Age of Athens; the Greek allies had been victorious in the Greco-Persian wars, Pericles ruled, and Socrates was around twelve years old. But Aeschylus wrote as though the city were at a fragile dawn—and as though it needed the protection of the gods and poets.

And that was probably true: By the end of the century, Athens had been defeated by Sparta, and it never fully recovered.

The United States is almost a quarter of a millennium old, but in many ways, it is still a young democracy, where basic civil rights have been legally protected for only sixty years, and other core liberal rights for far less. It is hard to tell today whether we are living through the tragic end of the American experiment in liberty and pluralism or on the cusp of a new way through. As the chorus of worn-down, elderly men in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* say at the start of the *Oresteia*, "The scales of Justice weigh out gain / to those who've learned from pain: / but as for what the future bears, / you'll hear as it occurs. / Let be: it will emerge as bright / as when the dawn brings light."⁴⁵

They are right: The truth will come. For them—graybeards past their prime, feckless and unable to act—that meant palace intrigue and murder, the dissolution of the city, a cruel tyranny, and then the implausible, last-minute intervention of the goddess.

I hope our fate is otherwise. Let's work to make it so.

