



# THE FAILURE OF CONSERVATISM

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Michael Anton is the man who today best communicates the fractures among the Right. He identifies, and exemplifies, growing incompatibilities among conservatives, both on the issues of the day and in beliefs about desirable political structures. Anton first came to public notice under a pseudonym, Publius Decius Mus, writing in 2016 during the brief life of a pro-Trump blog, the *Journal of American Greatness*.

In September of that year, Anton published a famous essay, "The Flight 93 Election." His first point was that, like the passengers of Flight 93, Americans opposed to the permanent boot-stamping dominance of the Left had an existential choice. They could, as it were, charge the cockpit by taking a chance on Trump. Or they could passively accept Hillary, and face certain political death. His second point was that their behavior when faced with this choice showed that the conservative movement, as it exists now, was wholly worthless. These claims were, no surprise, controversial.

MICHAEL ANTON

## AFTER THE FLIGHT 93 ELECTION

The Vote that Saved America and What We Still Have to Lose

Within a few weeks Anton revealed his identity; after the election he worked for several months in the Trump White House, in the national security apparatus, until the swamp creatures managed to come to dominate the West Wing and the populism of Trump's early months evaporated. So he departed for Hillsdale College in Michigan, and, for now, the life of a public intellectual. I hope he doesn't spend the rest of his days in that role; he would probably agree that we have enough public intellectuals and not enough doers. My guess is that soon enough, in the unsettled times ahead, he will find a new role.

This 2018 pamphlet reprints the original "Flight 93" essay, a follow-up "Restatement" also published prior to the election, and a new essay, "Pre-Statement on Flight 93." This last tells us what, exactly, it is

that Anton wants our politics to be, to meet the criticism that he had earlier offered only a negative vision. In all these essays, Anton's basic point is the same one as I am always hammering—we are in a new thing in American history, an existential struggle between the forces of Right and Left, respectively good and evil, and there can be only one. The Left has always known this and acted accordingly, with malice aforethought; the Right, or part of the Right, is coming to realize it. Between the modern Left and the principles of virtue there is no middle ground; there is no compromise; there is no universe in which the principles of the Left can continue to be allowed a seat at the public table. They must be defeated, and suppressed, root and branch. We must awake, and those Lotos-Eaters putatively on the Right who refuse to rouse from slumber must be thrown overboard. So says Anton, in essence, and I could not agree more.

Anton begins with a "Note," a recap of the reception of his original essay. This primarily means its reception on the Right; the Left didn't pay much attention then, deafened by their collective baying for Hillary's imminent ascension, and has not paid much attention since, either, which is probably a mistake. Within the Right, because the sclerotic organized Right of think tanks and little-read journals was Anton's main target, the backlash against Anton was fierce, though it was all of the pearl-clutching variety, free as a bird from all logic or reasoning.

Those same segments soon enough coalesced into the noisome #NeverTrumpers, rats following their diminutive, tubby Pied Piper, Bill Kristol, who has unfortunately not led them into the mountain to disappear forever. Here, and in the "Pre-Statement," Anton in his usual pithy style refutes what few coherent objections to his claims have been made. I will note those later, but Anton is willing to admit one, and only one, failure in his earlier essays—that in his original essay, he was insufficiently generous to and appreciative of Donald Trump.

In his "Note," Anton also explains his choice of pseudonym at more length, a name borne by two Roman men, father and son, who each sacrificed himself on the field of battle. He cites interpretations by both Leo Strauss and Harvey Mansfield to rebut his critics, using close readings of my favorite Machiavelli text, *Discourses on Livy*. Anton's basic point is that Machiavelli "says that a republic may be led back to its beginnings 'either through the virtue of a man or through the virtue of an order' and goes on to say that 'such orders have need of being brought to life by the virtue of a citizen who rushes spiritedly to execute them against the power of those who transgress them.' In other words, orders and men are both necessary and neither is superior to the other; virtuous men are necessary to execute good orders."

Anton here leaves some ambiguity as to his own goals. He says that "In 2016, I judged the modes and orders of my time—and especially of conservatism—to be exhausted and imprisoned within an inflexible institutional and intellectual authority. I believed that its conclusions on the most pressing matters were false and pernicious and that its orthodoxy therefore required smashing." Despite Machiavelli's warning that "nothing is more difficult to handle, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage, than to put oneself at the head of introducing new orders," Anton chose to do so. But to what end? He refers to being led back to beginnings, but he also speaks of new orders. Which is it? That is one of the things I will examine here, after first evaluating the three essays.

In the original *Flight 93* essay, Anton notes that all American conservatives agree that things are very bad in America, have been for some time, and are getting worse. If conservatives truly believe the critical importance to society of all the problems we face, from family breakdown to out-of-control government to an inability to win wars, they must conclude "we are headed off a cliff." But—they don't really believe it, as Anton illustrates with an article from the *Weekly Standard* (ironically, in retrospect, given that journal's fate), recommending for all problems the usual tired litany of conservative solutions, such as decentralization, federalism, and civil renewal. "Which is to say, conservatism's typical combination of the useless and inapt with the utopian and unrealizable. . . . 'Civic renewal' would do a lot of course, but that's like saying health will save a cancer patient. A step has been skipped in there somewhere. How are we going to achieve 'civic renewal'? Wishing for a tautology to enact itself is not a strategy."

This is the gravamen of Anton's complaint—conservatives keep offering the same solutions that have solved nothing, to solve problems that only get worse, as their power gets less and the Left grows ever more dominant. You can't believe that things are awful and getting worse, but also that they can continue on their current path indefinitely; it is a contradiction. And that's what today's conservatives, that is, those in the public eye, believe. (In fact, since Anton wrote, "leading" conservatives such as Jonah Goldberg have come right out and admitted that they are happy to lose and for the Left to win completely, just a little slower, please).

Even those few conservative solutions that have been tried have failed or been quickly erased by the Left. "The whole enterprise of Conservatism, Inc., reeks of failure. Its sole and ongoing success is its own self-preservation." Such claims have made Anton a prime target of the happy losers whom he attacks, ranging from Goldberg (who specifically targeted Anton in his terrible 2017 book, *Suicide of the West*) to Michael Gerson. For reasons I will discuss below, Anton's only organized allies appear to be

the Claremont Institute, and perhaps The American Conservative magazine—both powers on the Right, to be sure, but isolated from the invitations to cocktail parties and pats on the head from the cultural elite of the Left that are so important to Goldberg, Gerson, and the other similar indistinguishable nonentities who cluster together.

So what passes for today's American conservatism is of little or no value. I can get behind that. That doesn't mean all alternatives are virtuous, or desirable. Anton makes a point I am often found making, that Trump's mere existence is a sign of the times, not of good times, but as of an angel breaking a numbered seal. "Only in a corrupt republic, in corrupt times, could a Trump rise. It is therefore puzzling that those most horrified by Trump are the least willing to consider the possibility that the republic is dying." Sure, if you're part of the professional-managerial elite, the past two decades have been pretty good to you.

For everybody else, and for the fabric of society, the opposite is true, and if you can't see it, you're too embedded in the ruling class, or too dependent on their tolerance and largesse for your daily bread. Others have expanded on this point, from Tucker Carlson to Richard Reeves to Kurt Schlichter, though few have made the focus of their ire the conservatives who are supposed to care about such things.

The non-Trump Republican presidential candidates, had any of them won, wouldn't have done anything to stop or turn back the tide of the Left, since "their 'opposition' is in all cases ineffectual and often indistinguishable from support." But a Hillary win would be a fatal disaster for America, cementing its destruction. It "will be pedal-to-the-metal on the entire progressive-Left agenda, plus items few of us have yet imagined in our darkest moments. Nor is even that the worst. It will be coupled by a level of vindictive persecution against resistance and dissent hitherto seen in the supposedly liberal West only in the most 'advanced' Scandinavian countries and the most leftist corners of Germany and England.

We see this already in the censorship practiced by the Davoisie's social media enablers; in the shameless propaganda tidal wave of the mainstream media; and in the personal destruction campaigns—operated through the former and aided by the latter—of the social justice warriors. We see it in Obama's flagrant use of the IRS to torment political opponents, the gaslighting denial by the media, and the collective shrug by everyone else."

That all this would have come true is proven by the Left's behavior since the election. They do what they would have done under Hillary, but lacking the power of the executive branch, the damage they

can do is somewhat limited. On the other hand, their rage at losing to Trump has fueled the fire. Not having executive power, for now, doesn't stop, among other evils, endless violence against any public display of support for Trump; aggressive campaigns on the state level to legalize infanticide and push the latest in sexual fluidity as the moral equivalent of abolitionism; mass censorship of conservatives on all social media platforms; and the personal destruction of anyone within their reach, or within the reach of their allies in all large corporations, the media, or the universities. And, most of all, we see it in their two years of whipping up hate in the media and using bogus "investigations" to cripple Trump and persecute anyone associated with him.

Swinging around again to his punching bag, the weak betas of Conservatism, Inc., Anton notes that they certainly aren't going to lead resistance to the horrors of a Hillary administration. Even if they wanted to, they couldn't, since all opinion-making is controlled by the Left. But they don't want to; they "self-handicap and self-censor to an absurd degree. Our 'leaders' and 'dissenters' bend over backward to play by the self-sabotaging rules the Left sets for them." (I have complained before, for example, of the conservative lust for pre-emptive apologies, a perfect example of what Anton complains of).

What we need instead is a leader who will fight, who will punch back. He will stop importing millions of Third World migrants, who erode our economy's strength and vote in lockstep for the Left. He will adopt trade and antiglobalization policies that benefit all Americans. "Who cares if productivity numbers tick down, or if our already somnambulant GDP sinks a bit further into its pillow. Nearly all the gains of the last twenty years have accrued to the junta anyway."

What we can't have is Hillary. Conservatism, Inc., is "objectively pro-Hillary." Anton concludes that if we do get Hillary, in the longer term, "the possibilities will seem to be: Caesarism, secession/crack-up, collapse, or managerial Davoisie as far as the eye can see . . . which, since nothing lasts forever, at some point will give way to one of the other three. Oh, and I suppose, for those who like to pour a tall one and dream big, a second American Revolution that restores constitutionalism, limited government, and a 28 percent top marginal rate." We will return to these options, and whether any are desirable, below.

Anton's initial piece got just about the warmth of reception one would expect. Actually, it got no reception at all, until Rush Limbaugh read the entire thing on his radio program. (That conservatives dominate talk radio is intolerable to the Left, and censoring it a prime goal of theirs. The ability of new thoughts like Anton's to gain traction through that medium is why, even though talk radio can never set what the news is or what polite public opinion is allowed to be.) But then a wave of hatred and bile from

those conservatives attacked (that is, nearly all of them) crashed into Anton, along with some tut-tutting from a few conservatives who saw that their rage was merely proving Anton's point. Anton responded a few days later with "Restatement on Flight 93."

Here he briefly addressed the most cogent attacks on him. Using the passengers of Flight 93 as a metaphor was simply standard drawing of inspiration from heroes. It wasn't "disgusting." "It's quite obvious that's what really is disgusting to these objectors is Trump." Trump isn't too immoderate to be President; he may be a "buffoon," but "one must wonder how buffoonish the alleged buffoon really is when he is right on the most important issues while so many others who are esteemed wise are wrong."

Trump is not too radical; in fact, on the surface he's more progressive than other recent Republican presidential candidates. He's actually quite moderate in his policies of "secure borders, economic nationalism, and America-first foreign policy." The problem is that he is a threat to what is now called the Deep State, as outlined by John Marini: he might win, and he threatens "the current governing arrangement of the United States, [which] is rule by a transnational managerial class in conjunction with the administrative state." Trump is not "authoritarian," which is a meaningless term as used here (and as I have shown at length by analyzing post-election writings, merely means in practice "erosion of the power of the Left"). Trump does not want to "trash the Constitution," which anyway is laughable, given that the Left's entire, open and acknowledged, program of the past hundred years is to trash the Constitution.

No, reiterates Anton, he was right the first time. Conservatism is a miserable failure. Doom is at the door, and if you choose to let it in, your fate will be upon your own head.

We all know what happened next. Trump won. The Left lost its mind, and unleashed fresh helpings of savage hatred upon the land. (I did not predict this; I predicted a new era of optimism and limited comity. More fool me.) They marshaled all their resources, from that disgusting hate group the SPLC to Rod Rosenstein to Facebook to the FBI to Jonah Goldberg, in order to stop Donald Trump from fulfilling any of his promises. And we are still living through these days of rage, which are, probably, merely the foothills of our own coming hot civil war.

Anton, however, appears to have been stung by the claim that he only offered a negative vision, although on its face that claim is untrue. He therefore wrote a new piece, "Pre-Statement on Flight 93." Anton seems grudging about writing it; noting that since the Left's project is destruction, of all



opposition and of all non-Left "people, institutions, mores and traditions," "It's a bit rich to be accused by nihilists of lacking a positive vision." This piece is, I think, the least successful. It's not that it's bad; it's excellent. The problem is that while it rejects what Conservatism, Inc. has to offer, it repeats an equally unrealistic prescription, namely a turn back to the Constitutional and political framework of 1787 and 1865.

A combination of political philosophy, political argument, and history, in the Pre-Statement Anton cites Aristotle for the basic claim that all human activity aims at some good. Beyond food, shelter, and security, "mere life," the good life is happiness or felicity, which is achieved by developing our capabilities to reach the *telos* of man, "the completion or perfection of those traits which are uniquely characteristic of man." "Radical individualism and private hedonism," the goals of (though Anton does not say so) the Enlightenment, undermine human flourishing.

This much has been known, in the West at least, since the Greeks, but the American Founders brought political order in the service of these goals to near perfection (which was perfected by the post-Civil War amendments). Federalism, limited government, and representative republicanism created the best system ever. But it is not one that can be exported to all peoples in all times, nor can it work if there is inadequate "commonality in customs, habits, and opinions." As everyone with any sense knows, diversity is the opposite of our strength.

This near-perfect system has been attacked repeatedly since 1787, Anton tells us. First, by the followers of John Calhoun, unsuccessfully. Second, by the early-twentieth-century Progressives, successfully and causing great damage. And third, fatally, by the acolytes of John Rawls, purveyors of so-called social justice and of forced equality, and the New Left, advocates of the tearing down of America, group rights, and oppression theory. All these attacks are incoherent and destructive, but they have collectively succeeded in destroying the Founders' vision, and erecting in its place a system that maintains many of its outward forms but within is crawling with decay and worms.

As the Left's power grows ever greater, they must either "compound the lies, or suppress and punish dissent." They choose both, following the dictates of Herbert Marcuse and his heinous "repressive tolerance." We need to "return to life and the conditions of life: the rule of law, responsible freedom, confidence in our civilization, patriotism, and concern for the common good instead of only the particular good of groups claiming oppression or disadvantage."

I agree with nearly all of this as an analytical matter. As a prescriptive matter, though, it is sorely lacking, other than that Trump is somewhat better than Hillary in these regards. If I have a core political organizing principle, it is that you cannot go back; the way is shut. Truly insightful modern conservatives realize this and make it the starting point of their thought. But Anton seems to shrink from this conclusion, unwilling to realize, or recognize, that the vision of the Founders is dead. There is no path to return to it, and if we did, the massive changes in the world and in America would make their system a failure if re-implemented today. It was good, in a unique time and place, for a small and homogeneous country built on a politics of virtue.

The modern world is so very, very different from that; what the modern world needs is indeed a return to the principles of Aristotle, but not just those relating to the purposes of man, rather also those of varieties of political structure other than democracy, which Aristotle, and everyone else who matters, has always recognized as the worst form of government, for proof of which today we need only look around.

Anton is, therefore, a reactionary. I divide reactionaries into various camps, but the two relevant ones here are Straussians, followers of the German philosopher Leo Strauss, and what I call Augustans. Straussians, although they have various internal divisions, believe that the desired end of political history arrived already—and was left behind. Therefore, today's Cthulhu State, a multi-tentacled horror of unlimited and unaccountable power, exemplified by the monstrous administrative state that finds no warrant in the Constitution, should be destroyed and the Republic restored by the simple expedient of turning back the political clock.

Augustans, on the other hand, focus on power and its uses. A more common term for this is Caesarism, but that is a misnomer, since Caesar merely toppled a tottering system. It was Augustus who created a new one, in which the forms of republican government remained, and even some of its application, but the real power shifted, toward a mixed government with heavy monarchical and aristocratic elements. Rollback is not the goal; the goal is seizing the levers of power as they exist now, and overthrowing the great as the opportunity presents itself, creating a new thing entirely. Thus, the focus is power guided by virtue, but always power.

In his original *Flight 93* essay, Anton came across as Augustan. But he blurred this with his Pre-Statement, which is Straussian. Straussianism, while internally coherent, offers nothing, because there is no path to reach its goals. It is Reaction in the sense of turning the clock back, when what is called for is

Reaction in the sense of building a new thing guided by the wisdom of the past. Anton is extremely intelligent, and I suspect he is deliberately hiding the ball. I think what he really wants to call for is either of two of his three stated alternatives to Trump winning: Caesarism (that is, an Augustan state), or secession/crack up.

This conclusion is strengthened by the sarcasm with which Anton refers in his original essay to "a second American Revolution that restores constitutionalism, limited government, and a 28 percent top marginal rate." Other than tax rate, that's basically the Straussian solution, and he laughs at it. And since Anton says managerial Davoisieism will end up in Caesarism too, that suggests that the only two options left are the ones he wants to pick from. Trump, though, is not a good Caesar; he is a holding pattern, a finger in the dike while other pieces are being moved on the board. We are just waiting for the Man of Destiny, to be named later.

I don't know Anton, but my bet is that he realizes that he can't marginalize himself further by calling for the formal destruction of the Republic, even if it has already been destroyed in practice. He has to make a living, of course, and I don't think he's rich (despite Jonah Goldberg's sneering, yet bizarre, efforts to slur him as rich). But he clouds the air by failing to make a choice. I see why he can't, and instead tries to have it both ways. Me, I don't have to make a living as a public intellectual, and "marginal" grossly overstates my relevance, so I'll happily get behind an Augustan state, or the crack-up of the United States, or both. We're going to get there anyway, after all - the only questions are how fast, with how much unpleasantness, and whether the destination will be the Pax Romana or something less pleasant. I'm all in for a *Pax Romana* updated by Christianity, the other innumerable blessings of the West, and modern science. Whether we'll get it, I don't know.

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*The [image](#) shows, Solitary Figure in a Theater, by Edward Hopper, ca. 1092-1904.*

