

## THE CLAREMONT INSTITUTE AND THE POSTLIBERAL RIGHT. FROM IDEAS TO POLITICAL POWER

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This article explores the evolution of the Claremont Institute into a key ideological node of postliberalism in the United States. Using content and discourse analysis of Claremont publications, speeches, and policy outputs, the study traces the think-tank's transformation after 2016 from a scholarly Straussian think tank into a driving force of the New Right. Key findings indicate that Claremont, through strategic mechanisms, exerts influence and sets the GOP policy program – for example, Claremont's Washington programs helped translate postliberal themes into policy influence. The study concludes that the Institute functions as a vehicle for postliberal and increasingly illiberal ideology within American conservatism and illustrates how think-tank infrastructure can mainstream radical ideas. The research conducted uses a qualitative case study of the Claremont Institute, combining analysis of its publications, discourses and media appearance of influential leaders from the institute with an institutional analysis of its networks and activities.

**Keywords:** Claremont Institute, conservative ideology, illiberalism, postliberalism, think tanks

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**Rezumat:** Acest articol analizează evoluția Institutului Claremont într-un nod ideologic central al postliberalismului din Statele Unite. Analizând conținutul promovat în publicațiile sale, cercetarea urmărește transformarea institutului, după 2016, dintr-un think tank conservator tradițional în imaginea Noii Drepte. Concluziile principale arată că, prin mecanisme strategice, Institutul Claremont exercită influență și contribuie la conturarea agendei Partidului Republican – de exemplu, programele sale au ajutat la transpunerea temelor postliberale în politici concrete. Analiza evidențiază că, prin instrumentele sale, Claremont a modelat semnificativ retorica și prioritățile republicane (în domenii precum puterea executivă sau politicile culturale). Studiul concluzionează că instituția funcționează astăzi ca un vehicul pentru promovarea unei ideologii tot mai iliberale în cadrul mișcării conservatoare americane, ridicând semnale de alarmă privind erodarea normelor democratice liberale și ilustrând modul în care infrastructura ideologică a unui think tank poate normaliza idei radicale. Articolul utilizează analiza

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calitativă a publicațiilor Claremont, discursurilor și aparițiilor media ale personalităților din cadrul institutului precum și o analiză instituțională a rețelelor și activităților desfășurate de think-tank.

**Cuvinte cheie:** Institutul Claremont, conservatorism ideologic, iliberalism, postliberalism, think tank-uri

## I. From Intellectual Margins to Political Influence

# Postliberalism

in the United States has moved from academic debate to the political mainstream, reshaping the ideological foundations of the American right. Thinkers like Patrick Deneen and Adrian Vermeule have argued that classical liberal ideals – such as individual rights or free markets – have corroded the moral and communal order of society. Deneen, for example, faults mainstream conservatives for embracing “seven liberal principles” (from religious liberty to free markets) that in his view enabled a “liberal totalitarianism” destructive of institutions like family, community, and church<sup>1</sup>. Such postliberal critiques remained on the intellectual margins for years, their wider impact depending on institutions capable of transferring these ideas into political action. Among such institutions, the Claremont Institute has emerged as a pivotal force in converting postliberal theory into practical influence. This study asks: how and through what mechanisms did the Claremont Institute translate postliberal ideas into policy influence after 2016? The main hypothesis is that by strategically placing its personnel in positions of power and producing targeted publications, the Institute amplified its ideological agenda within the Republican policymaking sphere.

The paper draws on three complementary strands of literature to ground its analysis. First, the think tank influence literature examines how policy research organizations shape political agendas and decision-making. Foundational work by scholars such as Donald Abelson, James G. McGann, and Diane Stone demonstrates that think tanks operate through multiple channels: producing research, cultivating policy networks, training personnel, and framing political debates<sup>2</sup>. Importantly, this literature distinguishes between

<sup>1</sup> Patrick J. Deneen, “Abandoning Defensive Crouch Conservatism”, *Postliberal Order*, May 14, 2022, <https://www.postliberalorder.com/p/abandoning-defensive-crouch-conservatism>.

<sup>2</sup> For foundational work on the role of think tanks in contemporary policy-making, see: Donald E. Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2018); James G. McGann, *The Fifth Estate: Think Tanks, Public Policy, and Governance* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016); and Diane Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination: Think Tanks and the Policy Process* (London: Frank

different levels of influence: agenda-setting influence (defining which issues matter), policy influence (shaping specific proposals), and ideological influence (reframing underlying values and frameworks)<sup>3</sup>. Abelson argues that influence operates on a spectrum, and that demonstrating causal primacy requires careful empirical specification<sup>4</sup>. Second, the literature on policy networks and institutional politics, particularly the work of scholars such as Kathleen Thelen and Wolfgang Streeck on institutional change, provides conceptual tools for understanding how organizations like the Claremont Institute embed themselves in the broader political ecosystem<sup>5</sup>. This literature emphasizes that institutional influence is often diffuse and mediated through networks rather than unilateral, noting that multiple actors and contextual factors shape outcomes<sup>6</sup>. Third, scholarship on the American conservative movement, including works by Stefan Borg and Laura K. Field, situates the Claremont Institute's rise within the broader trajectory of the Republican Party's ideological evolution, particularly considering the post-2016 populist realignment<sup>7</sup>. This contextual understanding prevents attributing to the Claremont Institute, the sole responsibility for transformations that reflect wider political currents. Moreover, Field explicitly adopts the “ideas first” approach underlying this article's methodology, focusing “squarely on the intellectuals and ideas behind right-wing populism” rather than

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Cass, 1996). See also James G. McGann and R. Kent Weaver, eds., *Think Tanks and Civil Societies: Catalysts for Ideas and Action* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> On agenda-setting influence and the role of think tanks as policy entrepreneurs within broader networks, see especially: Stone, *Capturing the Political Imagination*. On policy influence across different stages of the policy cycle (from issue articulation to formulation and implementation), see: Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter?*. On ideological influence and the “war of ideas” over public discourse, see McGann, *The Fifth Estate*, as well as McGann and Weaver, eds., *Think Tanks and Civil Societies*.

<sup>4</sup> Abelson, *Do Think Tanks Matter? Assessing the Impact of Public Policy Institutes*, especially the chapters on: “A Conceptual Framework” and “Assessing the Influence of Think Tanks,” where he argues that think tank influence must be analyzed across different stages of the policy cycle and cautions against straightforward claims of direct causal impact.

<sup>5</sup> On institutional change and the embedding of organizations within broader political-economic arrangements, see: Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Thelen, eds., *Beyond Continuity: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, eds., *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Mahoney and Thelen, *Explaining Institutional Change*; see also Streeck and Thelen, *Beyond Continuity*. Both works emphasize that institutional outcomes emerge from incremental change driven by multiple actors in specific political contexts, highlighting that institutional influence is diffuse, contested, and mediated through broader networks rather than exercised unilaterally.

<sup>7</sup> See Laura K. Field, *Furious Minds: The Making of the MAGA New Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2025), especially the chapters on the “Claremonters”; and Stefan Borg, “A ‘NatCon takeover?’ The New Right and the future of American foreign policy,” *International Affairs* 100, no. 5 (2024): 2233-2245.

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on the financing networks, and thereby reinforcing the research framework based on discourse and institutional analysis<sup>8</sup>.

This study contributes to the think-tank influence literature by providing a detailed case study of how a single organization leveraged ideological infrastructure, personnel networks, and strategic positioning to amplify postliberal thought when the political opportunity arose. Specifically, the analysis illustrates the mechanisms through which intellectual movements transition from marginal status to institutional salience and policy relevance. The study also demonstrates the importance of distinguishing between the visibility of an organization, the coherence of its network, and the causal efficacy of its influence, distinctions often blurred in popular and journalistic accounts.

Founded in 1979 by students of Harry V. Jaffa, a prominent Straussian political philosopher, the Claremont Institute originally focused on teaching the principles of the American founding and “statesmanship” through a Straussian lens<sup>9</sup>. For decades it was a modest think tank devoted to Lincoln scholarship, constitutional law, and cultivating young conservative thinkers. However, since 2016, the Claremont Institute has embraced a far more radical mission.

This paper employs a qualitative institutional case study of the Claremont Institute to examine how a think tank can drive ideological change. The Claremont Institute was selected because of its prominent role in mainstreaming postliberal ideas within the American right, making it an illustrative example of the influence exerted by think tanks. The study combines discourse and content analysis on the Institute’s print publications, supplemented by organizational analysis of its activities and networks. It analyses primary documents (published Claremont materials, reports, official statements), outputs of ideologically aligned think tanks, policy proposals (including Project 2025 materials), and investigative journalism pieces. The study examines how Claremont publications frame political problems, define key concepts (e.g., “the regime”, “postliberalism”), and advocate policy positions. Discourse analysis identifies recurring themes, rhetorical strategies, and ideological shifts within the Claremont Institute’s output over time. Moreover, the study traces the Claremont Institute’s organizational evolution, including changes in leadership, funding, organizational structure (e.g., the establishment of the D.C. branch in 2021), and strategic priorities. This approach situates the Institute’s development within the broader history of conservative institution-building. The study also documents the Institute’s personnel networks by identifying key individuals, their transition from the Claremont Institute to government positions, and their roles in Republican political circles. While the

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<sup>8</sup> Michael E. Hartmann, “Philanthropy and *Furious Minds*”, *Capital Research Center*, November 17, 2025, <https://capitalresearch.org/article/philanthropy-and-furious-minds/>.

<sup>9</sup> Laura K. Field, “What the Hell Happened to the Claremont Institute?”, *The Bulwark*, July 13, 2021, <https://www.thebulwark.com/p/what-the-hell-happened-to-the-claremont-institute>.

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research does not engage in formal network analysis, it seeks to provide a descriptive mapping of connections.

Several methodological limitations warrant acknowledgment. The reliance on published sources, journalistic accounts, and public documents means that behind-the-scenes decision-making, private communications between Claremont leaders and political figures, and confidential strategic planning remain inaccessible. This limits the ability to establish direct causal links in some cases. Furthermore, distinguishing between the Claremont Institute's independent influence and its participation in broader conservative institutional networks is challenging. The Institute operates within an ecosystem of conservative think tanks, foundations, and media – all mutually reinforcing, and therefore, isolating the Claremont Institute's specific contribution requires careful consideration.

## II. Postliberalism in American Conservative Thought

Postliberalism has emerged as a notable intellectual current on the U.S. right – a reaction against the tenets of classical liberalism. American postliberal thinkers argue that liberalism's emphasis on the autonomous individual, free markets, and a secular, limited state has eroded the moral and social foundations of society<sup>10</sup>. They contend that prioritizing individual rights and personal choice above all has come at the expense of community, family, and spiritual cohesion<sup>11</sup>. In place of the liberal *status quo*, postliberals advocate a more communitarian and tradition-oriented politics that explicitly pursues the common good and social solidarity over values-neutral governance<sup>12</sup>. This school of thought has gained traction among American conservatives disenchanted with the longstanding fusionist consensus, instead seeking to redefine conservatism beyond the “liberal” framework shared by both mainstream left and right<sup>13</sup>.

One of the leading voices of this movement, political theorist Patrick Deneen, argues that liberalism has fundamentally undermined its own promises.

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<sup>10</sup> Stefan Borg, “In Search of the Common Good: The Postliberal Project Left and Right”, *European Journal of Social Theory* 27, no. 1 (2024): 3-21, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13684310231163126>.

<sup>11</sup> Adrian Pabst, “Postliberalism: The New Centre Ground of British Politics”, *The Political Quarterly* 88, no. 3 (2017): 500-509, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12363>.

<sup>12</sup> Rod Dreher, “Further Thoughts on Postliberalism”, *The American Conservative*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/national-conservatism-further-thoughts-on-postliberalism/>.

<sup>13</sup> Matt McManus, “National Conservatives, Postliberals and the Nietzschean Right: Meet Today’s Terrifying GOP”, *In These Times*, December 14, 2023, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/the-new-right-far-right-ideology-liberalism-democracy>.

Deneen observes that modern liberalism came to define liberty as radical personal autonomy – “the condition in which one can act freely... unconstrained by positive law” – in stark contrast to the older classical idea of liberty as virtuous self-rule<sup>14</sup>. Both progressives and mainstream conservatives, in Deneen’s view, have thus made “the liberal promise of autonomy a central goal”, dissolving many traditional restraints in the name of individual freedom<sup>15</sup>. The paradox, Deneen contends, is that liberalism “failed because it succeeded”: by liberating individuals from all unchosen obligations (to family, faith, place, etc.), it has left them isolated and society fragmented<sup>16</sup>.

In works like *Why Liberalism Failed* (2018), Deneen argues that this triumph of unchecked individualism has produced pathologies – a loss of community, declining social trust, cultural relativism – that liberalism cannot remedy<sup>17</sup>. Postliberals hold that true freedom is sustainable only when bound by a shared moral order and strong communal institutions, which liberal modernity has weakened.

Another key figure is Harvard jurist Adrian Vermeule, who explicitly challenges liberalism’s ideal of a neutral, procedurally constrained state. Vermeule criticizes the prevailing legal ethos (for example, originalism in constitutional interpretation) as “morally sterile” and insufficient to uphold the common good<sup>18</sup>. Instead, he calls for “common-good constitutionalism”, an approach premised on “substantive moral principles that conduce to the common good” which judges and officials should actively read into law<sup>19</sup>. In Vermeule’s view, the central aim of government and law is to “promote good rule”, not merely to safeguard open-ended individual liberties<sup>20</sup>. Thus, “constraints on power are good only derivatively, insofar as they contribute to the common good”, and the state should unapologetically “legislate morality” in areas like public morals, markets, and culture<sup>21</sup>. This vision flatly rejects the secular-liberal notion of state neutrality: postliberals argue that every regime rests on some vision of the good, and a purportedly “neutral” liberal state in fact imposes its own individualistic, relativistic values<sup>22</sup>. By reviving natural law principles and an assertive use of public authority, Vermeule seeks to restore an

<sup>14</sup> Patrick J. Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 37-38.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Adrian Vermeule, *Common Good Constitutionalism: Recovering the Classical Legal Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2022), 21.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 30-31.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>22</sup> Free Expression Podcast, “A Postliberal Future? (Patrick Deneen interview by Gerry Baker)”, *Wall Street Journal Opinion*. August 3, 2023, min. 39:07, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DP8AGVOYR04>.

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explicit moral framework in American law and governance<sup>23</sup> in lieu of what they see as liberalism's empty proceduralism<sup>24</sup>.

Though still heterogeneous, this U.S. postliberal circle generally shares several theoretical commitments. Specifically, they are skeptical of Enlightenment liberalism and see it as a civilizational dead-end and they draw deeply on religious (often Catholic) thought and traditionalist conservative ideas to imagine a reordered society<sup>25</sup>. Thinkers and commentators such as Deneen, Vermeule, Sohrab Ahmari, R.R. Reno, and others have rallied around the notion that America's cultural disarray – from family breakdown to nihilistic consumerism – stems from liberal ideology's triumph. Their writings in outlets like *First Things*, *The American Mind*, and *Postliberal Order* argue that only a deliberate re-anchoring of politics in shared moral truths and community norms can regenerate the republic<sup>26</sup>. Consequently, postliberals do not shy away from using state power to enforce normative ideals. According to McManus, this movement envisions “a new conservative elite that will use the state to implement socially revanchist policies in the name of the ‘common good’”<sup>27</sup>. In practice, that means endorsing a stronger role for government in guiding culture (on issues like family, education, and public decency) and in tempering market forces to protect local communities – positions that break sharply with the libertarian and secular tendencies of prior conservative orthodoxy<sup>28</sup>. Importantly, we can note that what began as an intellectual critique is now being channeled into institutional and political action.

Think tanks and journals have become conduits for postliberal ideas on the right. Notably, the Claremont Institute has in recent years given a platform to postliberal arguments, reflecting this ideological shift. The Claremont Institute's publications have featured figures like Deneen and Vermeule and grappled with calls for American “regime change” away from liberalism<sup>29</sup>. The Institute's house journal even acknowledged that Reaganite “fusionism” no longer suffices, and that new, more radical conservative doctrines are

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<sup>23</sup> William H. Pryor and Conor Casey, “Originalism Is Dead. Long Live Originalism”, *Judicature* 107, no. 2 (2023): 61-67, <https://judicature.duke.edu/articles/originalism-is-dead-long-live-originalism/>.

<sup>24</sup> Jeffrey A. Pojanowski and Kevin C. Walsh, “Recovering Classical Legal Constitutionalism: A Critique of Professor Vermeule's New Theory”, *Notre Dame Law Review* 98, no. 1 (2022): 403–432, <https://scholarship.law.nd.edu/ndlr/vol98/iss1/7/>.

<sup>25</sup> McManus, “National Conservatives, Postliberals and the Nietzschean Right”.

<sup>26</sup> Patrick J. Deneen, “Revitalizing the American Republic”, *Postliberal Order*, November 25, 2024, <https://www.postliberalorder.com/p/revitalizing-the-virtues-of-the-american>.

<sup>27</sup> McManus, “National Conservatives, Postliberals and the Nietzschean Right”.

<sup>28</sup> The American Postliberal, “What Is Postliberalism?”, June 1, 2023, <https://www.theamericanpostliberal.com/p/what-is-postliberalism>.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Anton, “Modernity and Its Discontents”, *Claremont Review of Books*, Summer 2023, <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/modernity-and-its-discontents/>.

ascendant<sup>30</sup>. In tandem, other organizations (e.g. the Heritage Foundation's post-2016 initiatives) and networks like the National Conservatism conferences have amplified themes of national common-good conservatism and civilizational renewal.

In sum, postliberalism has evolved from a fringe theoretical position into a visible force in American conservatism – one that seeks not just to critique liberal individualism and secularism, but to supplant them with an overtly moral, community-centric vision of public life. This emerging postliberal right provides the context for understanding the Claremont Institute's newfound role in championing a boldly illiberal conservatism oriented to first principles, the common good, and the reassertion of America's cultural soul.

### **III. The Conservative Infrastructure: Historical Continuities**

The Claremont Institute's evolution is best understood against the broader history of conservative institution-building. Movement conservatives have long invested in an intellectual infrastructure to challenge what they viewed as liberal hegemony in politics and culture. A turning point came in 1955, when William F. Buckley Jr. founded *National Review* as a journal of opinion to “change the nation's political and intellectual climate – which, at present, is preponderantly leftist”<sup>31</sup>. Buckley's magazine provided a forum that fused traditionalists, free-market libertarians, and anti-communists, while pointedly excluding fringe groups like the John Birch Society to discipline the conservative mind<sup>32</sup>. *National Review* and its cadre of writers (from Russell Kirk to James Burnham) helped make conservatism intellectually respectable and politically salient in the postwar era. It also pioneered a model: using media and ideas to mobilize a movement. According to Alvin S. Felzenberg, by the 1970s and 1980s, the United States had developed a unique ecosystem of conservative magazines, columnists, foundations, and think tanks – an “infrastructure” of ideas unmatched in other democracies<sup>33</sup>.

Alongside conservative media grew an array of policy think tanks explicitly designed to counter liberal institutions. The American Enterprise

<sup>30</sup> Charles R. Kesler, “National Conservatism and Its Discontents”, *Claremont Review of Books*, Spring 2024, <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/national-conservatism-and-its-discontents/>.

<sup>31</sup> National Review Institute, “The Legacy: *National Review*”, January 1, 2025, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2025/01/the-legacy-national-review/>.

<sup>32</sup> Jeffrey Hart, “Buckley at the Beginning”, *The New Criterion*, November 2005, <https://newcriterion.com/article/buckley-at-the-beginning/>.

<sup>33</sup> Alvin S. Felzenberg, “Buckley's Battle with the Birchers Was No Myth”, *National Review*, April 23, 2023, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2023/04/buckleys-battle-with-the-birchers-was-no-myth/>.

Institute (AEI) had existed since the 1940s, but, in time, it will be joined by new organizations like the Heritage Foundation (founded in 1973) and the Cato Institute (1977), among others. These organizations provided the research, policy blueprints, and personnel that Republican politicians could draw on as their effectiveness lay in coordinating scholarship, messaging, and policymaking into a coherent force. A notable example was Heritage’s 1980 “Mandate for Leadership”, a 1,000-page governing handbook released just after Ronald Reagan’s election. This document offered the incoming administration a detailed conservative policy agenda and management guide<sup>34</sup>. Reagan reportedly distributed the “Mandate for Leadership” to his Cabinet and appointed several of its contributors to key posts in his administration<sup>35</sup>.

This episode established a template for conservative governance: outsider ideas were incubated in think tanks, amplified through aligned media, and then translated into policy when the political moment arose. Throughout the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the conservative infrastructure continued to expand. Think tanks and advocacy groups published white papers, books, and talking points on everything from tax policy to national defense. Right-leaning foundations (such as Scaife, Bradley, and Olin) funded these institutions, recognizing that influencing the “war of ideas” was a prerequisite to political victory<sup>36</sup>. Magazines like *National Review* (and later *The Weekly Standard* and others) provided platforms to shape conservative messaging and critique liberal narratives. Meanwhile, advocacy groups and legal foundations (like the Federalist Society, founded 1982) trained cadres of lawyers and experts committed to conservative principles. By the time of Newt Gingrich’s “Republican Revolution” in 1994, and George W. Bush’s presidency in the 2000s, there was a well-established network funneling ideas from think tank white papers to Republican legislative agendas to executive branch positions. Conservative intellectual infrastructure had by then fully matured into a “self-aware movement” industry of journals, media outlets, research institutes, and training programs<sup>37</sup>.

The Claremont Institute initially followed this model in a modest way. In its early decades, Claremont was one node among many in the conservative network – known mainly for its Claremont Review of Books (founded in 2000) and the fellowships that educated young conservatives in American political thought. Its mission aligned with the traditional fusionism of the right, marrying reverence for the Founding and natural rights theory (a Straussian influence) with contemporary policy arguments about limited government and moral virtue. In essence, the Claremont Institute aimed to “teach the principles of the American Founding to the future thinkers and statesmen of America”, as its

<sup>34</sup> Kim Phillips-Fein, “The Mandate for Leadership, Then and Now”, *The Nation*, June 4, 2024, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/the-conservative-promise/>.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Hart, “Buckley at the Beginning”.

mission stated<sup>38</sup>. This position was consistent with the conservative establishment's effort to cultivate intellectuals who could populate academia, media, and government with right-of-center ideas. In practice, the Claremont Institute ran seminars on statesmanship, published scholarly essays on Lincoln and the Constitution, and hosted summer fellowships for students and young professionals (the Lincoln Fellowship, Publius Fellowship, etc.). Through the 1980s and 1990s, its profile was scholarly and niche – influential in certain academic and legal circles, but hardly a driver of mass political narratives.

The Claremont Institute's recent rise represents a new adaptation of the conservative infrastructure model to a post-2016 environment marked by populism, culture wars, and institutional distrust. Just as earlier, conservatives built institutions to challenge the mid-century New Deal liberal consensus, for the contemporary period, the Claremont Institute and the other fellow think tanks have retooled institutional conservatism to confront what they saw as a dominant “progressive regime”. The difference is that where past think tanks focused on tax rates or Cold War strategy, Claremont's focus is now directed at more existential questions of regime legitimacy, national identity, and the viability of liberal democracy itself. Today, the Claremont Institute stands next to the *National Review*, the Heritage Foundation, and other conservative groups, but it has repurposed their model for an era when many on the right believe the entire liberal order must be confronted head-on. As we will see in the next section, Claremont's story is one of an institution leveraging the traditional toolkit of think tank influence (ideas, cadres, and strategic alliances) to mainstream an agenda that even many conservatives until recently considered fringe.

#### **IV. The Claremont Institute: From Straussian Roots to Populist Vanguard**

For most of its history, the Claremont Institute was a relatively conventional think tank rooted in West Coast Straussian political theory. Although the Institute has not consistently occupied center stage in national politics, since its establishment in 1979 it has functioned as the more politically engaged wing of the Straussian milieu. Compared to most American think tanks, it has been less focused on detailed policy work, yet it has operated in a more explicitly political register than other conservative institutions in higher education. Its intellectual backbone can be traced to Harry Jaffa and his students, who championed a reading of the American Founding and Lincoln informed by natural law and classical political philosophy. Claremont's educational programs and publications stressed reverence for the Constitution,

<sup>38</sup> Claremont Institute, “Mission Overview”, <https://www.claremont.org/mission-overview/>.

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the Declaration of Independence's principles, and the need to cultivate "moral virtue" and civic education in citizens and leaders<sup>39</sup>.

In practical terms, this meant Claremont scholars often criticized progressive legal trends and championed a return to what they saw as the Founders' intent. The Institute's flagship *Claremont Review of Books* (CRB) published rigorous essays on statesmanship, citizenship, and the threats of moral relativism. In keeping with mainstream conservative thought, the Claremont Institute warned that modern liberal culture was eroding the virtues necessary for a free society, and it urged a recommitment to America's founding ideals.

The direction of the Institute took a decisive turn in 2016. Michael Anton's "The Flight 93 Election" essay, published on the eve of the election, signaled Claremont's break with the cautious conservatism of the past. Writing under a pseudonym (Publius Decius Mus), Anton argued that the election of Hillary Clinton would mean the death of America as we know it – comparing it to the hijacked Flight 93 where passengers had to storm the cockpit or perish<sup>40</sup>. He asked conservatives to charge into the political unknown by backing Donald Trump, despite Trump's deviations from orthodox conservatism. The essay's vivid language and high stakes framing ("a Hillary presidency is Russian Roulette with a semi-auto", Anton wrote) electrified the right-wing conversation. It "went viral and received widespread coverage across the political spectrum", with enthusiastic endorsements from populist outlets<sup>41</sup>. On the evening of September 17<sup>th</sup>, 2016, Rush Limbaugh, the right-wing radio personality who averaged fifteen million listeners a week spent most of his show reading the essay from the pages of the *Claremont Review of Books*<sup>42</sup>.

Establishment conservatives were critical – *National Review* ran rebuttals – but the essay unquestionably shaped the narrative of 2016 on the right. Steve Bannon, Donald Trump's campaign CEO, reportedly circulated it, and Trump himself echoed the piece "us-vs-them", "last-chance" tone in speeches. In effect, the Claremont Institute, via Anton, provided intellectual justification for Trumpian populism, cloaking it in the gravest possible terms of national survival. Emboldened by Trump's surprise victory, the Claremont Institute eagerly aligned itself with the new political reality.

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas Merrill, "The Claremont Institute, Harry Jaffa, and the Temptation of Theory", *The Bulwark*, November 15, 2021, <https://www.thebulwark.com/p/the-claremont-institute-harry-jaffa-and-the-temptation-of-theory>.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Anton (Publius Decius Mus), "The Flight 93 Election", *Claremont Review of Books*, September 5, 2016, <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/digital/the-flight-93-election/>.

<sup>41</sup> Jennifer Schuessler, "Charge the Cockpit or You Die": Behind an Incendiary Case for Trump", *New York Times*, February 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/20/arts/charge-the-cockpit-or-you-die-behind-an-incendiary-case-for-trump.html>.

<sup>42</sup> The Rush Limbaugh Show, "My Analysis of a Response to the Flight 93 Election Piece", September 9, 2016, [https://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2016/09/09/my\\_analysis\\_of\\_a\\_response\\_to\\_the\\_flight\\_93\\_election\\_piece/](https://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2016/09/09/my_analysis_of_a_response_to_the_flight_93_election_piece/).

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The decision would prove to be inspired: Anton was brought into the Trump White House as a National Security Council official in 2017<sup>43</sup>, and the former president of the Claremont Institute Michael Pack, a filmmaker who had worked on films with Steve Bannon, was nominated to lead the Broadcasting Board of Governors (he would leave his position in a corruption scandal within a year of his appointment<sup>44</sup>). According to reporting by Rosie Gray, Anton’s hiring was influenced by Bannon, who was a huge admirer of Anton’s intellectual vision, naming him “one of the most significant intellects in this nationalist movement”<sup>45</sup>. In the second Trump administration, over thirty alumni of the Claremont fellowship programs, including Anton, had been hired as members of the staff<sup>46</sup>.

Moreover, on the financial side, the annual contributions to the Claremont Institute have more than doubled, from five million dollars in 2015 to almost 12 million dollars in 2024<sup>47</sup>. Since 2004, Claremont’s board chair, New York investor Thomas Klingensteine, has been its most important benefactor, donating at least twenty-two million dollars to the Institute, with his average annual donation rising from roughly three hundred thousand dollars before 2015 to more than two million dollars thereafter and nearly three million in 2021<sup>48</sup>.

Klingenstein’s philanthropy has also made him one of the Republican Party’s biggest individual donors, and in his own essays and videos he now describes American politics as a “cold civil war” between those who want to preserve the American way of life and those who seek to destroy it, insisting that “in a war you must play to win”<sup>49</sup>. His money has funded media projects and political action committees that echo Claremont’s alarmist frame – warning about a “woke regime” and calling for a total freeze on immigration – and has

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<sup>43</sup> CNBC, “Trump’s National Security Spokesman Michael Anton Is Resigning”, April 8, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/04/08/trumps-national-security-spokesman-michael-anton-is-resigning.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Sarah Ellison, “How Trump’s Obsessions with Media and Loyalty Coalesced in a Battle for Voice of America”, *The Washington Post*, June 19, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/how-trumps-obsessions-with-media-and-loyalty-coalesced-in-a-battle-for-voice-of-america/2020/06/19/f57dcfe0-b1b1-11ea-8758-bfd1d045525a\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/media/how-trumps-obsessions-with-media-and-loyalty-coalesced-in-a-battle-for-voice-of-america/2020/06/19/f57dcfe0-b1b1-11ea-8758-bfd1d045525a_story.html).

<sup>45</sup> Rosie Gray, “Michael Anton, West Wing Straussian”, *The Atlantic*, March 24, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/03/does-trumps-resident-intellectual-speak-for-his-boss/520683/>.

<sup>46</sup> The Claremont Institute, “Annual Report – the Claremont Institute”, 2024, 11, <https://www.claremont.org/annual-report/>.

<sup>47</sup> ProPublica, “Claremont Inst for the Study of Statesmanship & Polit Philosophy – Nonprofit Explorer,” *Nonprofit Explorer Project*, n.d., <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/953443202>.

<sup>48</sup> Jason Wilson, “The Far-right Megadonor Pouring Over \$10m Into the US Election to Defeat ‘The Woke Regime’”, *The Guardian*, October 22, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/oct/22/thomas-klingensteine-megadonor-pro-trump-pac>.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

supported initiatives like *Action Idaho*, led by Claremont fellow Scott Yenor, which explicitly aimed to convert anti-Critical Race Theory and anti-lockdown mobilization into a durable radical movement<sup>50</sup>. In this sense, Claremont's post-2016 turn is not only ideological but also organizational and financial: a megadonor who shares its civil-war rhetoric has decisively reinforced the Institute's new trajectory.

Meanwhile, the Institute doubled down on the themes Anton had identified. The Claremont Institute's leadership and donors grew comfortable with a more radicalized vision of conservatism, one that openly challenged not just left-liberal policies but the legitimacy of the “liberal order” itself.

In 2018, Claremont launched *The American Mind*, a web magazine aimed at younger audiences and the broader culture war. The content of *The American Mind* is often critical and unsparing, declaring that America is in the grip of a tyrannical “woke” elite and that a counter-revolution is needed to restore the nation's soul. The Claremont Institute also began sponsoring or affiliating with figures from the newly assertive populist right – individuals who would have been far outside the old conservative consensus. The most notable example was Jack Posobiec, an internet activist known for peddling the Pizzagate child-trafficking conspiracy. In 2019, Claremont awarded Posobiec a Lincoln Fellowship. The decision caused controversy even on the right, with long-time conservative columnist, Mona Charen, lambasting Claremont for “beclowning itself with this embrace of the smarmy underside of American politics”<sup>51</sup>. Yet the Institute's leadership stood by the choice, reflecting a conscious strategy to forge a new coalition of postliberal, nationalist, and populist forces. This episode illustrates a key finding: Claremont's institutional identity shifted from gatekeeping conservative respectability to courting fringe influencers, a move that broadened its network but also exposed it to criticism for eroding intellectual standards.

At the same time, the Claremont Institute's rhetoric grew more openly hostile to America's prevailing political norms. No longer content to argue for policy tweaks or judicial originalism, Claremont authors began speaking in terms of regime collapse and restoration. Senior fellows like Michael Anton started entertaining ideas that had previously been relegated to speculative fiction – notably the concept of “Caesarism”. In Anton's 2020 book *The Stakes: America at the Point of No Return*, he mused that the breakdown of the republic might necessitate a “Red Caesar” – a reference to an authoritarian figure who could wield unchecked power to save “the American people” from an irredeemably

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Mona Charen, “A Once Honorable Conservative Think Tank Sells Out for Trump”, *Chicago Sun-Times*, July 12, 2019, <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2019/7/11/20691030/claremont-institute-jack-posobiec-alex-jones-conservative-think-tank-mona-charen-sun-times-columnist>.

corrupt system<sup>52</sup>. By 2022-2023, talk of a “Red Caesar” had percolated through Claremont’s network to the point that it gained national media attention. Experts warned that these calls for a “Red Caesar” – essentially a right-wing strongman – represent a “profound threat to American democracy” given Claremont’s influence on GOP circles<sup>53</sup>. Claremont fellows argued that such measures might be justified by an allegedly dire situation: one Claremont-associated academic claimed that “transgenderism, anti-white racism, censorship, cronyism...are now the policies of an entire cosmopolitan class” ruling America, and that “the US republic...is effectively at an end”<sup>54</sup>. In this conspiratorial view, an authoritarian backlash is not only tempting but perhaps necessary to “restore the strength” of the nation<sup>55</sup>.

The Claremont Institute’s post-2016 output also frames politics in stark, quasi-revolutionary terms. Institute writers frequently describe America as being in the throes of regime decay or even a pre-civil war crisis. The U.S. government led by the Democratic Party is referred to not as legitimate constitutional authority but as “the regime” – a hostile force subverting true American values. In 2021, Claremont senior fellow Glenn Ellmers authored an essay declaring “Most Americans today are not worthy of the name. [...] Millions of people who live in this country are not Americans in any meaningful sense of the term”<sup>56</sup>. He argued that a great counterrevolution must “[o]verturn the existing post-American order” and that those aligned with progressive politics are effectively enemies of the American way of life<sup>57</sup>. Such rhetoric blatantly rejects the premise of a pluralistic society and popular sovereignty – painting political opposition as treasonous or foreign. It is a departure from earlier conservative rhetoric that, however heated, still operated within the boundaries of loyal opposition and constitutional continuity.

In terms of concrete initiatives, the Claremont Institute has veered into even more unsettling territory. One example is the *Society for American Civic Renewal* (SACR), an opaque, men-only fraternal organization founded by former Claremont fellow Charles Haywood. In 2020, Claremont served as SACR’s fiscal sponsor and recorded a twenty-six-thousand-dollar grant to the group, even as

<sup>52</sup> Michael Anton, *The Stakes: America at the Point of No Return* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2020), 176- 245.

<sup>53</sup> Jason Wilson, “Red Caesar: The Authoritarian Future Some Republicans Want”, *The Guardian*, October 1, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/01/red-caesar-authoritarianism-republicans-extreme-right>.

<sup>54</sup> Kevin Slack, “The Constitution, Citizenship, and the New Right”, *The American Mind*, June 15, 2023, <https://americanmind.org/features/the-constitution-citizenship-and-the-new-right/>.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Glenn Ellmers, ““Conservatism” Is No Longer Enough”, *The American Mind*, March 24, 2021, <https://americanmind.org/salvo/why-the-claremont-institute-is-not-conservative-and-you-shouldnt-be-either>.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

SACR's internal mission statement, later revealed by investigative journalists<sup>58</sup> and extremism researchers<sup>59</sup>, promoted an explicitly anti-democratic project. SACR describes itself as a Christian "brotherhood of faith and solidarity" whose members will "form the backbone of a renewed American regime" and must "understand the nature of authority and its legitimate forceful exercise"<sup>60</sup>. Its membership criteria center on traditionalist Christian sexual ethics and patriarchal head-of-household leadership, and expert analyses compare SACR's gender-exclusive, cell-based structure to groups like the Proud Boys or Patriot Front.

The group's ideological texts, authored by Haywood under his "foundationalist" banner, call for a post-liberal order governed by a non-democratic regime of "unlimited means", explicitly welcome the rise of a Caesar as the "fastest, cleanest" route to political renewal, and treat "extreme violence" as a likely instrument of that transformation. Claremont's president, Ryan Williams, has acknowledged sitting on SACR's founding board, and Scott Yenor, the Claremont fellow mentioned earlier, leads its Boise chapter. By incubating and legitimating SACR, the Institute has moved beyond abstract theorizing into direct support for a Christian-nationalist, accelerationist project that dispenses with democratic procedures in favor of hierarchical rule by a self-selected elite.

In summary, from 2016 onward the Claremont Institute has transformed from a defender of the Founding to something of a counterrevolutionary headquarters. Journalist Matt McManus described the Institute's journey in the following way: "the Claremont Institute, which evolved from a nebbishy coven of West Coast Straussians pursuing 'classical virtues' into a bastion of writers toying with authoritarianism"<sup>61</sup>. Claremont's Straussian roots are still evident in its philosophical language and references to antiquity (even the idea of a "Caesar" is drawn from Roman analogy), but its current advocacy for populist nationalism and illiberal governance is something that Strauss or Jaffa likely never envisioned. This evolution mirrors broader transformations on the American right: as the conservative base and leadership have radicalized in the age of Trump, institutions like Claremont have both fueled and legitimized that radicalization. The Claremont Institute has given scholarly imprimatur to ideas

<sup>58</sup> Jason Wilson, "Claremont Institute Launches New Group with Ties to Christian Nationalism and Religious Autocracy", *The Guardian*, March 11, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/mar/11/claremont-institute-society-for-american-civic-renewal-links>.

<sup>59</sup> Beth Daviess, "Secure a Future for Christian Families: the Gender Ideology and Accelerationism of the Society for American Civic Renewal", *Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey*, May 13, 2024, <https://www.middlebury.edu/institute/ctec-publications-0/secure-future-christian-families-gender-ideology-and-accelerationism-society>.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Matt McManus, "Understanding the New Vanguard of the Right", *The Forge*, March 22, 2024, <https://forgeorganizing.org/article/understanding-new-vanguard-right>.

once confined to obscure blogs or fringe authoritarians. By channeling grievance and theory into a coherent (if extreme) narrative of regime crisis and national rebirth, Claremont has become the intellectual engine of a newly emboldened illiberal right. The next question is how these ideas move from think-piece and seminar rooms into the to become government policy – which is where Claremont's institutional leverage comes to the fore.

## V. Institutional Leverage and Political Penetration

Presently, the influence of the Claremont Institute extends well beyond provocative essays. Through strategic placement of personnel, collaborations with other organizations, and media amplification, the Claremont Institute has embedded its ideas in Republican politics. One key avenue of influence is via personnel – training and inserting individuals into positions of power. Michael Anton's trajectory is a case in point. After writing “The Flight 93 Election”, Anton was selected to serve in the first Trump administration as spokesman for the National Security Council in 2017 and, has also, served in the second Trump Administration as Director for Policy Planning in the Department of State until September 2025<sup>62</sup>. John Eastman, another Claremont senior fellow (and former law school dean), became an informal advisor to President Trump, notably authoring memos in late 2020 outlining a specious legal strategy for Vice President Mike Pence to overturn the election results<sup>63</sup>. Eastman's role on January 6, 2021 – when he spoke at the rally that preceded the Capitol attack and urged Pence to reject certified electors – made clear that a Claremont figure had moved to the center of an attempt to subvert a democratic election<sup>64</sup>. While Eastman's actions were disavowed by some at Claremont, the fact remains that the Institute had elevated a figure who played a pivotal role in a real-world challenge to constitutional norms.

Claremont alumni and fellows have also permeated Congressional staff and conservative political circles across the country. In the U.S. Senate, some of the young staffers guiding emergent “New Right” politicians come from Claremont's training programs. For example, Wells King, a policy advisor to former Senator of Ohio, now Vice President J.D. Vance, previously held a

<sup>62</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Michael Anton – Director Office of Policy Planning, January 20, 2025 - September 15, 2025”, <https://www.state.gov/biographies/michael-anton>.

<sup>63</sup> Charlie Hatcher, “Rebuttal: CMC Should Not Renounce the Claremont Institute”, *The Claremont Independent*, March 21, 2023, <https://www.claremontindependent.com/post/rebuttal-cmc-should-not-renounce-the-claremont-institute>.

<sup>64</sup> Julie Kohler, “The New New Social Conservatives”, *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, no. 67 (Winter 2023), <https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/67/the-new-new-social-conservatives>.

fellowship at the Claremont Institute<sup>65</sup>. King is one of Vice President's advisors tasked with translating Vance's populist worldview into legislative proposals, and his Claremont background indicates the Institute's ideological approval on Vance's policy views. Similarly, staffers connected to Claremont have worked with Senators Josh Hawley and Mike Lee, and with policy groups aligned with Florida Governor Ron DeSantis.

These links are reinforced by a wider ecosystem of firms and projects clustered around Claremont's milieu. An investigation into the Trump–Vance ticket showed that J.D. Vance's Senate press secretary, Parker Magid, previously worked for Beck & Stone, a far-right consultancy firm that boasts of conducting “clandestine actions” for clients on the “dissident right”, including secret societies and think tanks close to SACR and to the Claremont network<sup>66</sup>. Beck & Stone's co-founder Andrew Beck has publicly stated that he designed SACR's brand and that he is himself a member, with reporting tracing how personnel overlapped between Beck & Stone, SACR, the explicitly right-wing venture-capital firm New Founding, and prominent Claremont figures such as Ryan Williams and Michael Anton<sup>67</sup>. Taken together with the presence of Claremont alumni like Wells King in Vance's inner circle, this suggests a dense network of aligned donors, media entrepreneurs, fraternities, and policy advisers through which Claremont's postliberal agenda transfers into the staffing and strategic thinking of a prospective Republican administration.

Claremont's network, often overlapping with those of aligned organizations like the Heritage Foundation and the Federalist Society, functions as a recruitment pool that selects sympathetic thinkers into government roles. A 2024 profile of Vance's inner circle noted that unlike Trump, Vance is “deeply plugged into the New Right intellectual circles” and relies on a core group of writers and analysts for advice<sup>68</sup>. Many of these figures from think tanks and publications have Claremont ties, showing how the Institute's ideas flow into policy through cadre selection.

In 2021, the Claremont Institute took a further step to cement its policy influence by opening a Washington, D.C. branch: the Center for the American Way of Life, headed by Arthur Milikh (a former Heritage Foundation scholar). This outpost serves as both a policy shop and a talent recruitment hub in the nation's capital. It produces reports and manifestos aimed at lawmakers and regulators, often with a culture-war focus. For instance, the Center's website

<sup>65</sup> Ian Ward, “We Mapped JD Vance's Inner Circle”, *Politico*, August 9, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2024/jd-vance-inner-circle-guide>.

<sup>66</sup> Jason Wilson, “Revealed: Top Vance Aide Worked for Far-right Consultancy With Extremist Links”, *The Guardian*, August 28, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/aug/28/jd-vance-far-right-aide>.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

prominently lists “countering radical feminism” as one of its goals<sup>69</sup>. One article in *The American Mind* (cross-promoted by the Center) advocates a political program to “invite women into their natural vocations”, by which it means encouraging marriage and motherhood over careers<sup>70</sup>. Another emblematic text is Scott Yenor’s “Family Policy for a Great Country”, published by the Center as a written version of his National Conservatism speech and later cross-published in *American Reformer*, which lays out a detailed programme for rolling back no-fault divorce, restricting contraception and pornography, and re-establishing legal support for a patriarchal family order<sup>71</sup>. Yenor simultaneously serves as Director of State Coalitions at the Center for the American Way of Life and holds a leadership position at Heritage’s B. Kenneth Simon Center, making him a bridge between Claremont’s intellectual production and allied efforts to convert these prescriptions into model legislation at the state level.

These ideas are far to the right of even previous social conservative orthodoxy, but Claremont’s D.C. branch inserts them into white papers and legislative language that can be used by lawmakers on Capitol Hill. Beyond policy development, the Center for the American Way of Life also identifies and trains personnel for government service. By hosting roundtables, closed-door briefings, and fellowship programs in Washington, the Claremont Institute is cultivating a cadre of committed postliberal conservatives ready to step into governmental roles or staff positions under the right political circumstances.

A further illustration of Claremont’s role in policymaking comes from its legal arm, the Center for Constitutional Jurisprudence (CCJ). After President Trump issued Executive Order 14160, “Protecting the Meaning and Value of American Citizenship”, on January 20, 2025, a measure designed to narrow birthright citizenship for the children of non-citizen parents, CCJ intervened directly in the ensuing litigation. According to the Institute’s own press release, CCJ, led by John Eastman, submitted an *amicus curiae* brief urging the Supreme Court to uphold the order and to adopt a restrictive reading of the Fourteenth Amendment’s Citizenship Clause, explicitly framing this as a defence of Trump’s effort to “protect the meaning and value of American citizenship<sup>72</sup>”. The Supreme Court docket entries and the text of CCJ’s brief confirm that the Center, described there as a “public interest law arm of the Claremont Institute”, formally supported the executive order in the birthright cases. This

<sup>69</sup> Scott Yenor, “Family Policy for a Great Country”, *The Claremont Institute – Center for the American Way of Life*, October 13, 2022, <https://dc.claremont.org/family-policy-for-a-great-country>.

<sup>70</sup> Helen Roy, “Womanly Virtue”, *The American Mind*, October 20, 2022, <https://americanmind.org/features/florida-versus-davos/womanly-virtue>.

<sup>71</sup> Yenor, “Family Policy for a Great Country”.

<sup>72</sup> The Claremont Institute, “The Claremont Institute Files Amicus Brief Urging Supreme Court to Uphold Trump’s Executive Order on Birthright Citizenship”, April 30, 2025, <https://www.claremont.org/the-claremont-institute-files-amicus-brief-on-birthright-citizenship>.

episode shows that the Claremont Institute is not simply an opinion-shaping institution but a direct participant in litigation over a flagship Trump policy, seeking to translate its long-standing critique of birthright citizenship into enforceable constitutional doctrine.

Claremont's integration into broader conservative planning is perhaps best illustrated by its role in Project 2025. This is a coalition effort led by the Heritage Foundation to prepare a governing blueprint and personnel lists for the current Republican administration. The Heritage Foundation announced that Project 2025 has assembled “100 different groups under a single banner” to systematically prepare for a conservative takeover of the federal bureaucracy<sup>73</sup>. The Claremont Institute is one of these official coalition partners<sup>74</sup>. In practical terms, Claremont scholars have contributed to the Project 2025 policy agenda through the “Mandate for Leadership” tome published in 2024 – and helped identify potential appointees (especially those opposed to the “administrative state”)<sup>75</sup>. The Heritage coalition explicitly aimed to avoid the personnel pitfalls of Trump's first term by having ideologically vetted loyalists ready to populate the government on Day One of the administration<sup>76</sup>.

The Claremont Institute's involvement in this effort underscores how its once-fringe ideas are now incorporated into the long-term planning of establishment conservatism. Within the coalition assembled under Project 2025, one of the central architects of the policy guide and of the wider strategy to “remake” the administrative state is Russell Vought, director of the Office of Management and Budget in the Trump Administration and former head of The Center for Renewing America. In 2022 Vought published a programmatic essay, “Renewing American Purpose”, in Claremont's online journal *The American Mind*, in which he described the United States as a “post-constitutional” regime ruled by hostile bureaucracies and argued that conservatives must remove accumulated legal precedents to reassert aggressive presidential control over the bureaucracy<sup>77</sup>. Subsequent reporting on Project 2025 and Vought's confirmation hearings have treated the essay published in the Claremont journal as a manifesto for his project of constitutional change, noting that he has drafted hundreds of executive orders and detailed plans for a future Trump Administration on precisely the lines outlined there<sup>78</sup>. Claremont thus appears

<sup>73</sup> The Heritage Foundation, “Project 2025 Reaches 100 Coalition Partners, Continues to Grow in Preparation for Next President”, February 20, 2024, <https://www.heritage.org/press/project-2025-reaches-100-coalition-partners-continues-grow-preparation-next-president>.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Russell Vought, “Renewing American Purpose”, *The American Mind*, September 29, 2022, <https://americanmind.org/salvo/renewing-american-purpose/>.

<sup>78</sup> McKay Coppins, “The Visionary of Trump 2.0”, *The Atlantic*, May 16, 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2025/05/russell-vought-trump-doge/682821/>.

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both as a formal institutional partner in Project 2025 and as the platform where a key architect of the initiative set out the intellectual rationale for the sweeping restructuring of executive power envisioned in that blueprint.

Positions that Claremont has championed – for example, aggressively curtailing the civil service protections of federal employees, or using presidential power to punish “woke” corporations – are reflected in the political decisions announced by the Trump Administration, indicating consensus between Claremont and current political leadership. The *once-radical* has become, if not orthodox, at least an accepted part of the conversation on the right. Notably, the 2025 agenda is more extreme than Reagan’s 1980 agenda, yet the Heritage Foundation brought together “more than 350 conservative thinkers” (including Claremont’s team) to lend it credibility<sup>79</sup>. In short, the Claremont Institute’s partnership with Heritage in Project 2025 symbolizes its institutional normalization: the outsider of 2016 is helping write the playbook for the Republican Party’s next administration.

Beyond formal policy influence, the Claremont Institute has amplified its reach through a well-targeted media strategy as its fellows are omnipresent in right-wing media ecosystems. Claremont figures frequently appear on *Fox News* and talk radio, and on influential podcasts and YouTube shows. For example, the Institute’s thinkers (including Anton, Claremont President Ryan Williams, and others) became regular guests on *Fox News*, using that platform to disseminate terms like “regime” and to highlight themes of American decline. The Institute’s own media outlets frame political debates in hyperbolic terms that then seep into mainstream conservative rhetoric. It has become common to hear Republican politicians and pundits speak of the United States being on the brink of collapse or claim that a “Great Reset” or left-wing tyranny is imminent – language that mirrors Claremont publications. *The American Mind*, in particular, has specialized in coining catchphrases and narratives that get traction on social media. Terms like “the regime” (to delegitimize the previous administration and institutional elite), or “Cold Civil War” (to describe domestic ideological conflict), or “Red Caesar” have entered the vocabulary of the MAGA right largely due to the Claremont Institute’s propagation. By pushing these narratives, Claremont shapes not only policy proposals but the very language of conservative politics.

The repeated framing of the state of the Republic as one of national catastrophe and rebirth – a constant cycle of “American carnage” followed by the promise of restoration – has taken hold in Republican discourse. It serves to justify extreme measures: if the country is indeed in a late-stage collapse (culturally or politically), then extraordinary actions (even undemocratic ones) can be sold as necessary rescue efforts. The impact of this rhetorical shift is evident. When Florida’s Governor Ron DeSantis railed against the “floundering

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<sup>79</sup> Phillips-Fein, “The Mandate for Leadership”.

orthodoxy” of the ruling class or when Senator Hawley decries an alliance of “woke capitalists and leftists” regulating Americans<sup>80</sup>, they are echoing ideas refined in Claremont forums. In one concrete example, the panic over “Critical Race Theory” (CRT) in schools – which dominated headlines and elections in 2021-2022 – had direct Claremont involvement. The Claremont Institute played an instrumental role in stoking the anti-CRT movement by working closely with activist Christopher Rufo (of the Manhattan Institute) and advising politicians like Ron DeSantis on crafting anti-CRT and “anti-woke” legislation<sup>81</sup>. Claremont research fellows collaborated in the background to provide the pseudo-intellectual backbone for these culture war offensives, helping turn an obscure academic term into a rallying cry for parents and lawmakers. The result: numerous states (Florida, Virginia, etc.) adopted laws or directives echoing Claremont’s narrative of American heritage under siege by radical leftist indoctrination<sup>82</sup>. By such means, the Institute has demonstrated a capacity to translate ideas into concrete political outcomes. It is one thing to publish an essay about progressive elites “waging war on the American way of life” – which Claremont has done<sup>83</sup> – but quite another to see state governors and school boards acting on that premise, banning curricula, and firing administrators. That is precisely the kind of real-world influence the Claremont Institute has achieved in recent years.

In summary, the Claremont Institute has leveraged every tool of institutional influence to propagate its postliberal vision. It has seeded personnel into government and advisory roles, ensuring that its ideas have advocates in positions of authority. It has formed alliances with larger conservative coalitions (like Project 2025) to ensure its agenda is adopted by the current Republican administration. It has amplified its messaging through media – both its own outlets and sympathetic external ones – to shift the Overton window of acceptable conservative discourse. Through these strategies, the Claremont Institute exerts an outsized influence on the trajectory of the American right. What was once a small think tank devoted to abstract philosophical debates is now, as *The New York Times* has described it, a nerve center of conservative

<sup>80</sup> Sam Adler-Bell, “Welcome to the Claremont Institute, where pro-Trumpers are waging a war on corporate America over ‘wokeness’”, *Business Insider*, July 19, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/conservatives-capitalists-divorce-trump-woke-capital-going-to-get-ugly-2021-7>.

<sup>81</sup> Phillip M. Bailey, Chelsey Cox, and Aleszu Bajak, “How Critical Race Theory Went from Conservative Battle Cry to Mainstream Powder Keg”, *USA Today*, November 15, 2021, <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/politics/2021/11/12/critical-race-theory-outrage-built-multi-year-conservative-effort/6337814001/>.

<sup>82</sup> Kohler, “The New New Social Conservatives”.

<sup>83</sup> Arthur Milikh, “A New Conservatism Must Emerge”, *RealClearPolicy*, February 16, 2021, [https://www.realclearpolicy.com/articles/2021/02/16/opening\\_statement\\_for\\_the\\_center\\_for\\_the\\_american\\_way\\_of\\_life\\_660266.html](https://www.realclearpolicy.com/articles/2021/02/16/opening_statement_for_the_center_for_the_american_way_of_life_660266.html).

politics<sup>84</sup>. Its ascent demonstrates how an institution, by coordinating ideas, people, and propaganda, can steer the direction of an entire political movement. But this success also raises unsettling implications, which we turn to next: namely, what does it mean for American democracy and for the conservative movement when the ideological anchor of the right is steering it in an openly anti-democratic direction.

## VI. The Future of Conservative Thought

Claremont's rapid rise and transformation have provoked an intense debate across the political spectrum. Liberal democrats see the Institute's new direction as a dangerous inclination towards authoritarianism – effectively an incubator for anti-democratic ideology. More surprisingly, perhaps, many traditional conservatives are alarmed as well, accusing Claremont of betraying the values it once championed. The clash over Claremont mirrors the broader reckoning on the American right in the age of Trump: whether the conservative movement will double down on illiberal, populist nationalism or rediscover a commitment to liberal democratic principles.

Mainstream media outlets frequently highlight Claremont's role in eroding democratic norms. For example, in the wake of January 6, 2021, observers noted that a Claremont senior fellow, John Eastman, had been “closely involved” in the attempt to overturn a legitimate election – providing a legal memo and encouragement for disregarding voters' will<sup>85</sup>. That opened many eyes to what Claremont had become. Mark Joseph Stern labeled Claremont “a racist fever swamp with deep connections to the conspiratorial alt-right”, citing the Institute's fellowship for Jack Posobiec and a Claremont-published essay by Eastman that questioned Kamala Harris's eligibility for the vice presidency (a thinly veiled birther conspiracy)<sup>86</sup>. Likewise, *The New Republic* ran a feature calling Claremont “The Anti-Democracy Think Tank”, going in depth about its promotion of ideas like “Red Caesarism” and arguing that

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<sup>84</sup> Elisabeth Zerofsky, “How the Claremont Institute Became a Nerve Center of the American Right”, *The New York Times Magazine*, August 3, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/03/magazine/claremont-institute-conservative.html>.

<sup>85</sup> Laura K. Field, “John Eastman: The Dems Made Me Do It”, *The Bulwark*, August 10, 2023, <https://www.thebulwark.com/p/john-eastman-the-dems-made-me-do>.

<sup>86</sup> Mark Joseph Stern, “The White Supremacist “Scholars” Pushing the Kamala Harris Birther Lie”, *Slate*, August 14, 2020, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/08/kamala-harris-birther-birthright-citizenship-claremont.html>.

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Claremont provides an intellectual sheen to what are essentially authoritarian, anti-egalitarian impulses<sup>87</sup>.

Prominent liberal scholars have pointed out that the Claremont Institute's agenda – from undermining voting rights to inciting mistrust in elections – aligns disturbingly with global autocratic trends. When Claremont's *American Mind* website published essays entertaining the breakup of the United States or suggesting military rule in urban areas plagued by disorder<sup>88</sup> critics warned that such talk edges into advocacy of violence. Mona Charen's 2019 column, titled “A once honorable conservative think tank sells out for Trump”, captures the sentiment of many old-guard conservatives. She wrote that Claremont “stands out for beclowning itself with this embrace of the smarmy underside of American politics”, lamenting that those supposedly devoted to the Founders' thought had “jettisoned their devotion to truth and virtue”<sup>89</sup>. Laura K. Field pointed to Claremont's fellowship of online provocateurs and its indulgence of conspiracy theories as signs of intellectual collapse<sup>90</sup>.

To traditional conservatives, the Claremont Institute's postliberal turn undermines core principles the institution once upheld: rule of law, limited government, constitutionalism, and the dignity of the individual. For instance, conservative legal scholars criticized Claremont for Eastman's election-subversion scheme, noting that it violated the peaceful transfer of power which is a bedrock American norm. Some past senior fellows of the Claremont Institute have quietly distanced themselves or expressed concern. *The Claremont Review of Books* printed a “searing critical analysis” of Eastman's actions in 2021 by a Claremont-affiliated professor<sup>91</sup> – suggesting internal unease with how far things had gone. And yet, Claremont's leadership for the most part has not reversed course; if anything, it has leaned harder into its new identity, dismissing detractors as stuck in an outdated, defeatist mind-set. A number of Claremont's positions mark a profound departure from earlier conservative ideals, raising concerns about democratic backsliding. Meanwhile, the Institute's embrace of conspiracy theories has been blatant since through fellows like Posobiec, Claremont gave platform to wild claims (Pizzagate, Seth Rich murder conspiracies, etc.) that not only lack evidence but corrode public trust<sup>92</sup>, or

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<sup>87</sup> Katherine Stewart, “The Claremont Institute: The Anti-Democracy Think Tank”, *The New Republic*, August 10, 2023, <https://newrepublic.com/article/174656/claremont-institute-think-tank-trump>.

<sup>88</sup> Ellmers, “‘Conservatism’ Is No Longer Enough”.

<sup>89</sup> Charen, “A Once Honorable Conservative Think Tank”.

<sup>90</sup> Laura K. Field, “The Decay at the Claremont Institute Continues”, *The Bulwark*, April 21, 2022, <https://www.thebulwark.com/p/the-decay-at-the-claremont-institute-continues>.

<sup>91</sup> Joseph Bessette, “A Critique of the Eastman Memos”, *Claremont Review of Books*, Fall 2021, <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/critique-eastman-memos>.

<sup>92</sup> Field, “What the Hell Happened?”.

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promoted authors with neo-Nazi views, such as the Claremont senior fellow writing under the pseudonym “Raw Egg Nationalist”<sup>93</sup>.

Furthermore, Claremont’s normalization of violence-tinged rhetoric sets it apart from traditional conservative discourse. The repeated references to secession, civil war, or a coming “regime clash” create a rationale for violent conflict. Glenn Ellmers’ statement that millions of Americans loyal to the current president are “not Americans” effectively writes off a majority of the electorate as illegitimate<sup>94</sup> and explicitly justifies a “counter-revolutionary” goal of overturning the existing order<sup>95</sup>. The logical implication – that political differences can no longer be resolved through elections or debate, but only through force or dictatorial imposition – is the language of extremists, not of think-tank intellectuals in a democracy. As Kohler notes, such talk from Claremont exemplifies how “social conservatism and illiberalism have become inextricably intertwine”, fueling a moment “ripe for escalating political violence.”<sup>96</sup> When those sentiments are coming from an organization providing staff and ideas to top Republicans, the risk of democratic backsliding is clear and present. Despite these troubling signs, the Claremont Institute’s success cannot be denied, highlighting the potency of ideological infrastructure in shaping political movements. The Institute has ensured that postliberal critiques of liberal democracy did not remain confined to academic seminars but instead became actionable in the political realm.

The Institute’s cohesive mix of publications, fellowships, and alliances has allowed it to set an intellectual trend – the revulsion with liberalism shared by thinkers like Deneen and Vermeule – and operationalize it. By institutionalizing postliberal thought, the Claremont Institute gave it staying power and practical import, reflected in legislative proposals, executive orders drafted, and even in school board controversies. It is a case study in how ideas need organization behind them to change the world. Without an entity like the Claremont Institute, many postliberal ideas might have withered as mere ivory-tower speculation or online chatter. With Claremont, those ideas had a vehicle to spill over into the halls of power. Whether this right-wing illiberal turn represents a lasting realignment or a passing phase remains to be seen. Some argue that what we are witnessing is a genuine transformation of the American right – a permanent break with the fusionist, democratic conservative tradition. Certainly, the recent cohort of Republican politicians and their base show signs of long-term acceptance of Claremont’s themes (skepticism of elections, glorification of strongman tactics, viewing opponents as enemies of the state). If figures like Donald Trump, J.D. Vance, or a “Red Caesar” to be named later,

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<sup>93</sup> Field, “The Decay at the Claremont Institute Continues”.

<sup>94</sup> Ellmers, ““Conservatism” Is No Longer Enough”.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Kohler, “The New New Social Conservatives”.

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continue to dominate, then Claremont’s vision could define conservatism for a generation or more.

On the other hand, history offers examples of ideological trends that had a brief life. Some observers note that “post-liberalism” could expire akin to earlier intellectual movements that never fully caught on. In the 1990s, communitarianism was briefly in vogue; in the 2010s, “reformicon” conservatives tried to soften the edges of the Republican Party – neither substantially reoriented the right<sup>97</sup>. It is possible that Claremont’s influence will wane if its prescriptions lead to electoral defeats or public revulsion. It is conceivable that after the Trump era, the Republican Party could seek a new equilibrium, and institutions like Claremont might return to more moderate stances or find themselves marginalized. However, even a “passing radicalization” can inflict lasting damage on democratic norms. Every time a norm is broken – a peaceful transition cast in doubt, a political opponent branded a traitor – it becomes harder to return to the previous baseline.

The Claremont Institute’s role in normalizing such norm-breaking means that even if the Institute’s appeal fades, the ideas it has unleashed may persist in the political mainstream. There is now a cohort of younger conservatives, some trained by Claremont, who genuinely believe that the liberal order is illegitimate and must be replaced. They are unlikely to simply recant those beliefs, more likely, they will continue to promote them in different forums. In that sense, the Claremont Institute has seeded a movement whose momentum may carry forward independently. The future of conservative thought will likely be a contest between the Claremont-influenced vision and whatever opposition can be mounted by more traditionalist or centrist conservatives. The stakes of that contest are high: one path points toward a breakdown of the two-party democratic compact, the other toward a possible re-normalization of liberal-democratic norms within the right.

In sum, the Claremont Institute’s ascent has had both empowering and troubling effects. It exemplifies the strength of a well-crafted intellectual infrastructure to reshape a major political movement – a success of institution-building that others (left and right) might learn from, but it also showcases how that strength can be directed toward ends that many Americans find deeply troubling: conspiracism, authoritarian temptation, and disdain for pluralistic democracy. The Claremont Institute’s success forces one to grapple with how resilient the democratic culture is when confronted by determined, well-funded actors intent on undermining it from within. The answer to this question will help determine whether the current illiberal wave in American conservatism is a historical aberration or the new normal.

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<sup>97</sup> Jamelle Bouie, “Mitt Romney Is Inventing Policies for a Fantasy G.O.P.”, *The New York Times*, July 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/13/opinion/abortion-romney-child-tax-credit.html>.

## VII. Conclusion

The story of the Claremont Institute over the past decade illustrates how ideas, when paired with institutional strategy, can travel from the fringes to the center of political power. Claremont's shift from Straussian constitutionalism to populist nationalism (and even authoritarian tendencies) reflects the broader transformation underway within American conservatism. As a case study, the Claremont Institute demonstrates the importance – and the peril – of a well-developed intellectual infrastructure in politics. It shows how a relatively small organization, by strategically cultivating talent and producing seemingly compelling narratives, can legitimize radical ideologies and guide the trajectory of a major party. In Claremont's case, radical theories that liberal democracy has “failed” or that an “aligned regime” must take its place published in white papers and fellowship programs became something that sounds like a serious governing philosophy, rather than what they once would have been labeled – extremism.

In light of this, the Claremont Institute's efforts have helped provide “the missing argument” for a new form of conservatism<sup>98</sup>, and that argument has resonated with many on the right. The Institute has been an intellectual anchor for a political realignment framed in terms of the American right's turn towards nationalism, illiberalism, and a Manichaean view of domestic politics. In doing so, Claremont's rise also raises urgent questions about the resilience of liberal democracy in the United States. Democratic systems assume a basic commitment from major parties and institutions to play by constitutional rules and accept pluralism. What happens when a significant portion of one side's intellectual output – embodied by the Claremont Institute – concludes that those rules and norms are a hindrance to be bypassed rather than a legacy to conserve? The fact that calls for a “Red Caesar” or for abandoning longstanding liberties (like freedom of speech and religion, which some Claremont-aligned writers argue should be curtailed for the common good<sup>99</sup>) are coming from well-connected thinkers and not just anonymous fringe commentators is a sign of democratic distress. Democratic decline and the erosion of norms often come from within, when actors who have gained influence through democratic means start using that influence to undermine the system. Claremont's ascent within the Republican Party, combined with its illiberal agenda, fits this pattern well.

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<sup>98</sup> Zerofsky, “How the Claremont Institute Became a Nerve Center”.

<sup>99</sup> Zack Beauchamp, “The Intellectual Right's War on America's Institutions”, *Vox*, November 19, 2021, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2021/11/19/22787269/conservatives-america-chris-rufo-patrick-deneen>.

The future of the American right – and by extension of American democracy – may hinge on how this tension is resolved. Will the postliberal, anti-democratic strain represented by the Claremont Institute become the Republican Party's dominant creed, or will it be a temporary episode in the long history of conservative politics? It is conceivable that a series of electoral losses or public repudiations could force a course correction, leading to the marginalization of the Institute's most extreme voices. Conversely, another victory in 2028 by a team sympathetic to Claremont's worldview could further entrench those ideas in policy, making the break with liberal democracy effectively permanent. Even within the right, there is a contest for ascendancy between the Claremont Institute and more traditional conservatives. That contest is not just intellectual but moral: it asks whether conservatism's aim is to preserve the principles of 1776, or to overthrow the alleged corruption of “the regime” by any means necessary. Ultimately, the Claremont Institute's journey from a niche academic outfit to a hub of the “New Right” is a cautionary tale. It highlights both the power of ideas and the responsibility that comes with nurturing them. Claremont has shown that determined ideologues with institutional backing can alter the trajectory of politics – but the direction now bends toward confrontation, exclusion, and possibly authoritarianism.

Based on our analysis, several claims about the Claremont Institute's influence can be made. It is well documented that Claremont has provided personnel to Republican administrations and agencies, that its legal arm has directly intervened in litigation over keystone policies such as Trump's attempt to restrict birthright citizenship, that its fellows and alumni are embedded in Senate and executive-branch offices, and that it is an official partner and intellectual contributor to coalition projects like Project 2025. These links show, at a minimum, that the Claremont Institute has helped supply the language, rationales and human capital for recent conservative efforts to expand executive power and to reshape family and citizenship policy. In contrast, other causal claims – for instance, that Claremont was the primary driver behind particular statutory provisions or specific executive orders – remain more speculative. In those areas the Institute is best understood as one influential node within a wider conservative ecosystem that also includes organizations such as the Heritage Foundation, the Federalist Society, and the Manhattan Institute, as well as the broader right wing media environment. The article therefore treats the Claremont Institute as a central but not exclusive actor of the New Right's illiberal turn.

In closing, the rise of the Claremont Institute signals that the battle of ideas in America is very much alive, and its outcomes are consequential. Whether this heralds a new era in which American conservatism is fundamentally illiberal or proves to be a transient phase that provokes a recommitment to democratic norms, will shape the American political landscape in the years ahead. The only certainty is that ideas – and the institutions that

champion them – matter greatly. Claremont's influence is a testament to this, and a reminder that the defense of liberal democracy requires an equally robust and adaptable infrastructure to counter the illiberal appeals of its determined opponents.

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