

The Chronicle of Higher Education

http://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Academic-Home-of-Trumpism/239495?cid=wb&utm_source=wb&utm_medium=en&elqTrackId=56d1eadee1834ce8a571d9beb5e56914&elq=b63df85fd10541298b05af0a254c8c73&elqaid=13036&elqat=1&elqCampaignId=5383

The Academic Home of Trumpism

By Jon Baskin MARCH 17, 2017



Claremont Graduate U., in California. Dave Amos

I arrived on the Claremont campus in search of the Straussians, but for the first hour all I could find were feminists.

It was just before noon, and I was at the Motley, a student-run coffee shop and study space devoted, said a sign above the entrance, to "diverse feminist critiques." One wall had been turned into a giant blackboard, on which students scribbled math equations. The others were decorated with posters of feminist icons, slogans promoting intersectionality, and advertisements for a forthcoming "Funk the Patriarchy" party. Another flier announced "We're Launching Economic Warfare!" next to a drawing of the president's face peeking out from behind a circular "No Trump" sign.

Did the Motley regulars know that, less than 400 yards away, the academic vanguard of the Trump administration had been provided with office space and tenure?

Charles R. Kesler, whose class on *The Federalist Papers* I would be attending that afternoon, is a professor of government at Claremont McKenna College, and presiding chieftain of an obscure (until recently) tribe of political philosophers known as the "West Coast Straussians" — named for the émigré philosopher Leo Strauss. Kesler is also the editor of *The Claremont Review of Books*, the conservative magazine that *The New York Times* says is "being hailed as the bible of highbrow Trumpism." "Like Richard Nixon in '68," Kesler wrote in May 2016, in one of his many prescient columns, "Trump felt that this election might test whether the center could hold, whether a silent majority could be mobilized on behalf of the country itself. The issue was not so much a showdown over liberal or conservative policies, but the simpler, more elementary question of whether a majority still wanted America to be great again."

Noting the virulence of the opposition to Trump on his own liberal-arts campus, Kesler also predicted that, if Trump were to win, "the next four years may be one long demonstration," as had been the case after the election of 1968. That prediction may yet bear out, but, beyond the fliers, I saw little evidence of unrest as I made my way from the coffee shop to a nondescript basement classroom in the Claremont Graduate University.

The writer of one of the founding documents of Trumpism was 'inculcated in the Straussian conservative world of the Claremont Graduate School.'

"Does anyone want to be national-security adviser? I hear there's an opening." Kesler, 61, strode into the room wearing a royal-blue suit, maroon-framed glasses, and a Dennis the Menace smirk. He was referring to the previous night's news that President Trump's national-security adviser, Michael Flynn, would step down. The class laughed nervously — given rumors that Kesler "had the ear" of the White House, the question might not have been entirely rhetorical.

Kesler, who arrived at Claremont McKenna College in 1983, relaunched *The Claremont Review of Books* in 2000, hoping to create a conservative counterpart to the *New York Review of Books*. The magazine had survived for just under two years in the mid-1980s, when it looked more like a college newspaper and had about 600 subscribers, under the leadership of the legal scholar Ken Masugi. Published in both iterations by the Claremont Institute, a think tank not far from campus, the *CRB* has no formal connection to any of the seven institutions in the Claremont University Consortium, but it is staffed predominantly by former graduate students of Kesler's. Several professors in Claremont McKenna's government department are frequent contributors. With about 14,000 subscribers, Kesler's *CRB* has long received plaudits from conservative intellectuals like George Will, Jonah Goldberg, and Yuval Levin, and it achieved wider notoriety during the George W. Bush administration, when the editors made a conservative case against the war in Iraq. But until recently, says John B. Kienker, the managing editor, it could still be spoken of as an "underground hit."

That changed on September 7, 2016, when Rush Limbaugh returned from a commercial break [with the words](#), "I have here a column that I would love to read to you in its entirety and I can't because it is 10 pages long." The [column](#) was called "The Flight 93 Election," and it was written under the pseudonym Publius Decius Mus. Its muscular opening sentence — "2016 is the Flight 93 election: Charge the cockpit or you die" — gives some sense of why the piece might have

appealed to the shock jock, but not of what made it truly scandalous: Here was a conservative intellectual not merely supporting Trump but offering, as Decius put it, "*reasons* for doing so."

Now recognized as one of the founding documents of Trumpism, the essay argued that the corruption of our times — "out-of-control government, politically correct McCarthyism," and "a disastrously awful educational system," to name a few of the telltales — accounted for both the emergence of Trump and the necessity of electing him; that the conservative establishment was Googling in its think tanks while the Republic burned; and that "America first" represented a sensible call for the country to come to its (common) senses. Limbaugh read nearly half of the essay's 4,300 words on the air, pausing only to remind his listeners that he'd been telling them all this for years.

The digital stampede quickly crashed the Claremont Institute's website, registering 255,000 page views in its first week online (at the time, the magazine had been averaging about 40,000 per month). But for those paying attention, the *CRB* had already distinguished itself by the diversity of its offerings on Trump's ascendancy. In May 2016, at a time when most conservative elites were still fantasizing about a convention coup, Kesler issued a [qualified endorsement](#) of the Republican nominee's "late-blooming political talents." John Marini, a professor of political science at the University of Nevada at Reno, [praised Trump](#) in July for having grasped that neither political party any longer provided a "meaningful link between the people and the government." And the senior editor, William Voegeli, explained why he was "[anti-anti-Trump](#)." Two weeks after the publication of "Flight 93," Voegeli countered Decius' "heroic" case for Trump with a "[merely prudent](#)" one.

Then, in February, *The Weekly Standard*'s Michael Warren [revealed that](#) the pseudonymous author of the "Flight 93" essay was Michael Anton, a 47-year-old former speechwriter for President George W. Bush who now works on Trump's National Security Council — news that only reinforced the suspicion that the *Claremont Review of Books* could offer a keyhole into the mysterious new administration. But Warren's article also hinted at a different kind of mystery: Anton, he reported, had been "inculcated in the Straussian conservative world of the Claremont Graduate School."



Charles R. Kesler

Brad Torchia, *The New York Times*

Kesler's graduate seminar on the day I visited focused on how the authors of the *Federalist* — Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, all writing under the pseudonym "Publius" — used rhetoric to indict the arguments of their "antifederalist" opponents. In the section discussed in class, Publius informs his readers of whispers "in the private circles of those who oppose the new Constitution," insinuating that the antifederalists are secretly planning the "dismemberment" of the union. Such whispers may or may not have been real, Kesler said, but the authors of the *Federalist* were inaugurating an august national tradition: disqualifying one's opponents by accusing them of covertly desiring the destruction of the Republic.

Speaking later in his office, which looks out on the exquisitely groomed Claremont McKenna quad, Kesler connected his point about rhetoric to "The Flight 93 Election." He said he found the article's guiding metaphor — America is an airplane headed for fiery destruction — melodramatic, but the conceit was "very much in the American tradition of trying to rally voters to the polls because 'the Republic is at stake!'"

The convivial Kesler seems an unlikely avatar of the "pro-Trump intellectuals who want to overthrow America," as the Claremont crowd was [described](#) in the *New Republic*. The same can be said for the considered posture of the magazine he edits, the web-only "Flight 93" essay notwithstanding. Kesler had rejected an earlier pro-Trump submission from Anton, on the grounds that it was "too caffeinated" for its moment, and he turned down an invitation to contribute to the *National Review*'s much-discussed "[Never Trump](#)" issue, "not because I was determinedly pro-Trump, but because I couldn't write a negative piece when I wasn't really feeling negative, although I wasn't endorsing him, either."

But the more one reads the *CRB*, and Kesler — who now describes himself as "the most pro-Trump, and I am pro-Trump, of the magazine's immediate staff" — the more one suspects that the difference between Anton and Kesler is more a matter of style than of substance. In an email exchange, Anton described Kesler as his most influential professor at Claremont Graduate University. And the two share a doctrinal self-certainty that can be traced to their common intellectual inheritance.

Both Anton and Kesler identify themselves as "West Coast Straussians," which means they sit on one branch of a family tree whose trunk is Leo Strauss. Strauss, who emigrated to America in 1937, teaching first at the New School for Social Research and then at the University of Chicago (near the end of his career, he taught briefly at Claremont), was known for his painstaking interpretations of the great works of the Western tradition. A student of Heidegger's and an early admirer of Nietzsche, he ultimately sought to address the "crisis" he believed had been provoked by modern philosophy's turn away from the animating sources of Western morality: classical philosophy and biblical religion. Although Strauss's "esoteric" writing style made him mysterious to some outsiders — the Cambridge philosopher Myles Burnyeat [called him](#) the "Sphinx without a secret" — his ideas inspired many devoted students, some of whom split after his death, in 1973, over how to apply them to the American context.

The "East Coast" school, of which Allan Bloom, author of *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), was the most prominent representative, read Strauss as having endorsed America's liberal democracy for being built on the "low but solid ground" of Lockean political philosophy. The founding fathers, according to this perspective, had done the best they could given the

foreshortened moral horizon of modernity: the American Republic provided peace and security, but it was insensible to what Strauss believed the ancients, particularly Plato and Aristotle, had identified as true virtue or excellence.

Much has been made over the years about the East Coast Straussians' infiltration of the neoconservative foreign-policy establishment, but the two most credible suspects, the *Weekly Standard* editor Bill Kristol and the former deputy secretary of defense Paul Wolfowitz, have never connected Strauss's ideas to their advocacy of spreading democracy abroad. Concentrated in places like St. John's College in Maryland and the University of Chicago's Committee on Social Thought, East Coasters have more commonly maintained a scholarly distance from day-to-day political combat, preferring, as Strauss did, to affect society through a long-term commitment to education. When they have drawn on Straussian concepts in their public statements, as some did in opposition to Trump's candidacy, it has usually been in defense of institutions and norms — like freedom of religion or the "gentlemanly" politician — that they believe keep America on its modest but stable footing.

But another of Strauss's students, Harry V. Jaffa, did not agree that America was just another compromised product of modernity. Pointing often to Strauss's decision to open his book *Natural Right and History* (1953) with a quotation from the Declaration of Independence, Jaffa, who died in 2015, developed what he presented as a Straussian case for America as a truly great regime, founded predominantly on a combination of Aristotelian and biblical — that is ancient, as opposed to modern — principles.

Trump's disdain for expertise and convention, so disturbing to both liberal and conservative elites, is what is most promising about him to the Claremonsters.

An eager polemicist, Jaffa did much to exacerbate the East Coast-West Coast split with personal attacks on Bloom (famously hinting at his alleged homosexuality) and Thomas Pangle, a professor of government at the University of Texas at Austin. But the polemics were not just personal: They also made the point, rather relentlessly, that for an American political philosopher the pursuit of truth requires the patriotic, and sometimes very public, defense of the "self-evident" truths laid out in the country's founding documents. To that end, Jaffa himself took a break from academe in 1964 to work as a speechwriter for Barry Goldwater.

Kesler, who wrote his dissertation under the direction of Harvey C. Mansfield, a professor of government at Harvard and an influential East Coast Straussian, became aware of his West Coast counterparts in 1979, while working on an article about Jaffa for *National Review*. Like many of those involved with the *CRB*, he speaks of his initial encounters with Jaffa's writing in terms akin to a religious conversion, and four years later he joined Jaffa on the Claremont McKenna faculty. (West Coast Straussians have also established academic beachheads at the University of Dallas and at Hillsdale College, under the direction of its current president, Larry P. Arnn, a former president of the Claremont Institute and an alumnus of the Claremont Graduate University.)

Although the "Flight 93" essay might seem to paint a pessimistic picture of an America experiencing existential turbulence, both its frame and its style reflect Jaffa's conviction that the country's political philosophers sometimes have an emergency role to play in its political life. "A core difference between West Coast and East Coast Straussians," Anton told me, "is that we in

the West believe there is an urgency to political engagement." As a graduate student under Jaffa and Kesler, Anton learned to be "mindful of the higher plane that is above politics and that informs (or should inform) politics. But also to take seriously Strauss's admonition not to have contempt for politics."

Not only Anton's article but the *CRB* as a whole represents, in this sense, an expression of the belief that conservative intellectuals can cut a path between the East Coast Straussians' political reticence and the ineffectual tinkering of the think tankers. This goes some way toward accounting for the Claremont crowd's willingness to engage so directly during the past election cycle. Yet it still leaves unexplained how a group so attached to the principles of the Constitution could place its faith in the author of *The Art of the Deal*.

The Claremont Institute resides on the first floor of a nondescript office park, next to a chiropractor. Inside, cardboard boxes and makeshift cubicles mingle discordantly with dark wood paneling, an ornate spiral staircase, and a two-story chandelier that hangs, somewhat ridiculously, over the welcome desk. The walls are covered with portraits of Lincoln, Washington, and scenes from the American Revolution, as if to provide visual accompaniment to the scholarly commentaries on the Lincoln-Douglas debates and the American founding, many of them by Jaffa, that line the institute's bookshelves.



The day after Kesler's class, I met there with the managing editor, John Kienker, and the senior editor, William Voegeli, both of whom expressed mixed feelings about the notoriety the magazine had received for its connection with the Trump administration. Kienker said I was the fourth journalist he had spoken with in the previous few weeks, and that articles about the magazine would soon be published in *The New York Times* and *Vanity Fair*. But both expressed some hesitation about becoming so closely associated with the unpredictable new president.

"When everyone expected he would lose to Hillary," said Voegeli, "that meant there would be a residue of stuff he had done and said and then the Republican Party, in defeat, would be trying to

pick up the pieces and decide what parts of that could be woven into the conservative brief. That's not the case anymore."

Voegeli, the only staff member I met who didn't come to the magazine from Claremont Graduate University, also explained how the "Claremonsters," as they're sometimes called, could endorse a candidate who demonstrated such antagonism to constitutional niceties such as the separation of powers. The reason, Voegeli said, had to do with Kesler's main contribution to the Claremont project, which is his examination of the century-old origins of American progressivism.

That case is, interestingly, intertwined with an examination of the modern research university. American progressivism, Kesler argues in several articles as well as in his most recent book, *I Am the Change: Barack Obama and the Future of Liberalism* (Broadside, 2012), began in earnest with Woodrow Wilson, who ran the country with a mentality he had absorbed as president of Princeton. Not incidentally, the progressives whom Wilson brought with him into government were taken largely from the first generation of American Ph.D.s. The result was the rise and rule of the "administrative state," a term of art that plays, for the Claremonsters, approximately the same role that the "culture industry" plays in the literature of the Frankfurt School. To Kesler and company, the growth of this "fourth branch of government" has accounted not only for a series of costly and ineffective social programs but also for the gradual erosion of democratic norms and the substitution of the founders' philosophical wisdom with the shallow certainties of university-trained "scientists" (think Robert McNamara or, better, Cass Sunstein).

In other words, one of the things that is most disturbing about Trump for liberal and conservative elites (including some East Coast Straussians) — his utter disdain for expertise and convention — is what is most promising about him from the point of view of the Claremonsters. "There's a fundamental clash between the self-evident truths of the Declaration and the worldview of the progressives," said Voegeli. "Our view is that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed, whereas progressives are inclined to think that government derives just powers from the expertise of the experts." Voegeli's sense that Trump drew his power from the consent of the governed, often in open opposition to the expertise of the experts, connected with what Kesler had earlier praised to me as Trump's "willingness to fight and his openness to changing both the Democratic and the Republican establishments." Or, as Anton put it in "The Flight 93 Election": Only a "loudmouth" could outshout the "bipartisan junta."

Is the Claremonsters' embrace of Trump another sign of the rise of a postmodern right?

Seeing Trump's appeal as linked to his hostility to administrative elites offers an intriguing angle on his explosive early clashes with government bureaucracies. Media commentators have tended to view these as evidence of the administration's incompetence, but, from Kesler and Voegeli's perspective, it's no surprise that professional civil servants and administrators, inculcated in the liberal world of the modern research university, do not approve of Trump's agenda, or that Trump views many of them as his enemies. When the Trump senior adviser Stephen K. Bannon [told](#) the audience at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) last month that Trump was planning the "deconstruction of the administrative state," it must have been music to the Claremonsters' ears.

Back on campus on my last day at Claremont, another kind of deconstruction was on my mind. For at least two generations, it has been leftist professors who were supposedly addicted to

tearing things down: This is the basis of nearly every conservative brief against postmodernism. But the habit now seems to be spreading.

In a column on CPAC's speaking invitation, and then disinvitation, to Milo Yiannopoulos, the internet troll and former Breitbart editor, in February, *The New York Times's* Ross Douthat [argued](#) that a conservatism "confident in what it stands for and what kind of society it wants to build" would never have considered a provocateur like Milo as a standard-bearer. For a conservatism united largely by an oppositional sensibility, on the other hand, "neither consistency nor propriety are consensus virtues any longer — and indecency in the service of attacking liberalism is no vice."

Douthat's ending is a play on the famous sentence — "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice" — that Harry Jaffa wrote for Barry Goldwater in 1964. Jaffa may always be remembered in some circles for his attacks on fellow Straussians, but his best writing is deeply idealistic, exhorting readers to appreciate the full grandeur of the Constitution, and of American statesmen, like Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr., who managed, without undermining its authority, to address its imperfections. Yet it might seem that Douthat's criticism could apply to the support of some of Jaffa's followers for Trump, a political provocateur with a Milo-like attraction to the prospect of mutually assured destruction.

Is the Claremonsters' embrace of Trump another sign of the rise of a postmodern right? When commentators describe the new president as ushering in a "post-truth" era, they usually mean that he denies the authority of the experts, the very thing the *CRB* writers place at the core of his populist appeal. But when Trump tweets that his phones were wiretapped by the previous president, or asserts that "we've got a lot of killers" in the United States, in response to a question about Vladimir Putin's politically motivated assassinations, he reveals himself to be "post-truth" in a sense that should be harder for the Claremont intellectuals to shrug off. Indeed, his relativistic reasoning in such cases could not be better engineered to undermine faith in the timeless moral truths they associate with the founding: Never has an American president located himself more squarely beyond good and evil.

The Claremont crowd, and especially Voegeli, has acknowledged aspects of this problem, arguing in Trump's defense that he can hardly do more harm by accident than the arch-progressive Hillary Clinton would have done on purpose. But they also maintain that he could be more than a wrecking ball. At best, they contend, Trump will revitalize the relationship between the American government and its people, and possibly even make his party great again. In his essay for the winter issue of the *CRB*, Kesler lays out the ways in which Trump's platform mirrors that of the Republican Party between the Civil War and the Great Depression, when it favored high protective tariffs, infrastructure investment, cautious immigration, and a non-interventionist foreign policy.

"In a strange way Trump has overleaped the post-Cold War conservative and Republican establishment to go back to a much more successful political version of Republicanism," Kesler told me. "I don't assert that he's consciously trying to do this. His own reading of the situation has led him to reconnect to a tradition that's been obsolete for a long time."

He added, genially: "There are some legitimate reasons to wonder about his abilities as a president."

Jon Baskin is a founding editor of The Point.

A version of this article appeared in the [March 24, 2017](#) issue.