



## Ideals Carved In Stone

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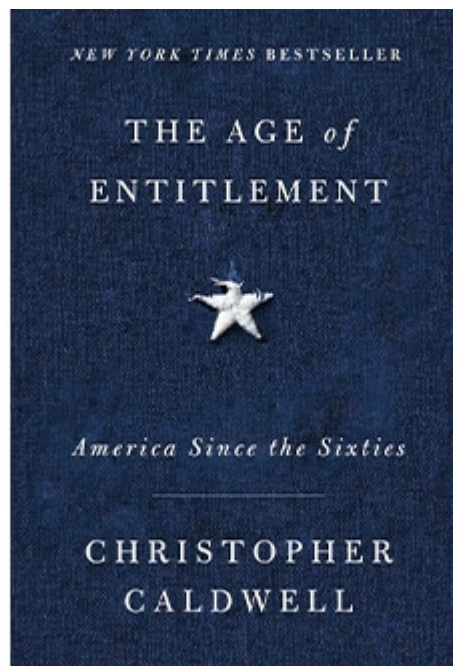
In his famous speech at Mount Rushmore for Fourth of July celebrations this year, President Trump bellowed: “Make no mistake: this left-wing cultural revolution is designed to overthrow the American Revolution.” He was referring to the Black Lives Matter protests which had taken to city streets to desecrate monuments and statues erected to honour American history and values. Trump went on to proclaim: “We will expose this dangerous movement, protect our nation’s children, end this radical assault, and preserve our beloved American way of life.”

The political battlelines for the 2020 election enunciated by Trump between the American way of life and the cultural left had, just four months earlier, been established more deeply and philosophically by perhaps the most influential conservative institution of the Trump era: the Claremont Institute. The stated mission of this think tank is to “restore the principles of the American Founding to their rightful, preeminent authority in our national life.” It combines

conservative philosophical inquiry with deep engagement in contemporary issues, and so “teaches, writes, and litigates”. Earlier this year its chairman, Thomas Klingenstein, wrote a highly influential and prescient essay titled *Preserving the American Way of Life*. Klingenstein argued that America is amid a regime-level contest between the American way of life – based on individual dignity, self-reliance, freedom, work, volunteerism, and reverence for tradition – and multiculturalism.

The post-1960s constitution is based on group identity.

In Klingenstein’s essay, multiculturalism as practised in the USA “sees society not as a community of rights-bearing individuals with a shared understanding of a national good, but as a collection of cultural identity groups, ranked in order of victimhood (though all oppressed by white males), and aggregated within highly permeable national boundaries... Identity politics is the politics of multiculturalism. Political correctness is its enforcement arm.” The two conceptions of America’s future are mutually exclusive: “multiculturalism involves a way of life that cannot exist peacefully with the American way of life.” Only one will prevail.



The Age of Entitlement: America Since the Sixties  
Christopher Caldwell  
Simon & Schuster, 2020, pp352

Klingenstein’s essay became popularised by one of the world’s most widely read tabloids, the *New York Post*, which included a column about the essay on 23 June by Michael Goodwin. That column was later read out by the world’s most listened to talk-show radio host, Rush Limbaugh, whose audience is in the tens of millions. In other words, ideas laid out in an essay were covered in a populist newspaper’s column, then read out by a populist talk-show host, and found their way

into the speech of a populist President. A profound undertaking of consciousness raising and a demonstration of the power of ideas, one could argue. This is the context in which Christopher Caldwell's latest book, published in January 2020, *The Age of Entitlement: America Since the Sixties*, should be read.

Caldwell—also involved with the Claremont Institute as a senior fellow and contributing editor to *The Claremont Review of Books*—argues the bifurcation of American society can be traced back to the 1960s, and specifically to the *Civil Rights Act* of 1964.

The “changes of the 1960s, with civil rights at their core”, created, according to Caldwell, “a rival constitution, with which the original one was frequently incompatible”. The original constitution of 1789 is based, fundamentally, on individual rights, freedoms, and equality before the law, manifest through, for example, protections afforded to the individual for freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of association, and legal and political rights.

The post-1960s constitution, by contrast, is based on group identity, affirmative action, quotas, and victim-based identity politics. If the old constitution was based on individual equality, the new one is based on group equity. Ultimately the 1960s, Caldwell argues, made “race the central concept in the country’s official self-understanding”.



Author Christopher Caldwell argues the bifurcation of American society can be traced back to the 1960s.

Photo: Erin Schaff/The New York Times/Redux

That America is living in two constitutions and two regimes is not necessarily a novel observation. The political left has for generations openly admitted it does not have any reverence for the constitution of 1789, and in pursuit of judicial activism prefers the malleable concept of a ‘living



constitution' in which the text of the constitution can be endlessly re-interpreted to fit contemporary political and ideological preferences. Conservatives, on the other hand, usually subscribe to originalism, meaning the text of the constitution is to be interpreted as written at the time of writing, on the basis that the constitution is informed by timeless principles which apply equally to all.

But what Caldwell does make clear is that the constitution—any constitution—is only as strong as those who are there to interpret, enforce, and apply it. This has long been identified as one of the weaknesses of a written versus unwritten constitution: once something is written down, it can be interpreted using tortured logic in any way imaginable. And this is also why the stakes are so high for nominations of Supreme Court justices. They will have the ultimate say over which constitution prevails.

Americans fear holding the wrong opinion could destroy their lives.

In response to this activism many conservatives began to search for conviction politicians willing to push back against congress and challenge the courts head on, and they thought this was what they were getting when they supported Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 and 1984. But the victories were pyrrhic.

According to Caldwell, Reagan "was put in command of a victorious insurgency and handed away its victories". "Having promised for years that he would undo affirmative action 'with the stroke of a pen', lop the payments that LBJ's Great Society lavished on 'welfare queens', and abolish Jimmy Carter's Department of Education," Caldwell argues that Reagan discovered "once he became president, that to do any of those things would have struck at the very foundations of desegregation."

Instead, Reagan developed a grand bargain for white baby boomers by subsidising those who opposed affirmative action and race-based identity politics with tax cuts which, in the absence of attendant spending cuts, contributed to rapid growth of public debt. The effect was that "Reagan permitted Americans to live under two social orders, two constitutional orders, at the same time. There was a pre-Great Society one and a post-Great Society one."

Caldwell overplays his hand a fraction here. For instance, Caldwell argues earlier in his book that the identity politics ushered in by civil rights activism was opposed by a substantial majority of the white population. Yet, later, he suggests whites were apparently content to live with being on the bottom of the victimhood ladder for a few thousand extra dollars per year. Are values really that cheap among consumerist baby boomers or was something deeper at work, beyond the political realm?

Caldwell discusses the leftward shift not just of laws and courts, but of those at the commanding heights of culture and the economy, and big business in particular. Caldwell argues the well-documented shift of big businesses to the left of the cultural spectrum primarily can be attributed to the prospect of lawsuits should a business be considered to be engaging in any kind of discriminatory recruitment practices. In this dynamic we see the key to the enduring influence of



affirmative action and race-based discrimination is the outsourcing of its enforcement to the private sector. “The fear of litigation privatised the suppression of disagreement,” and as a consequence, argues Caldwell, “Americans in all walks of life began to talk about the smallest things as if they would have their lives destroyed for holding the wrong opinion. And this was a reasonable assumption.”

Caldwell offers the fairly bleak outlook that race-based politics has become baked into American culture to the point where the perceived losers over the last six decades—namely white men—are beginning to want their slice of the anti-discrimination pie. Whereas anti-discrimination laws were once the preserve of what are considered marginalised and oppressed groups, other identity groups, such as Christians, have sought to use anti-discrimination laws for protection both in the US and Australia.

It remains to be seen whether the USA does continue down this path, or whether—as canvassed in the cover story—the more multiracial populist base observed in States such as Florida can disrupt the nexus of multiculturalism and the politics of victimhood. That at least seems more prospective than what Caldwell offers as the solution: ridicule. Caldwell celebrated conservatives ridiculing and making fun of all of the absurdities, contradictions, and hypocrisies caught up in victimhood identity politics.

Certainly there is much to be made fun of, and watching the ‘victimhood Olympics’ as intersectional groups argue for their place at the bottom of society (and thus the most virtuous) has become a sometimes enjoyable spectator sport, at least on Twitter. But for decades conservatives have been making fun of the left’s tedious set pieces such as demanding changing iconic brand and place names, and yet have had difficulty making lasting progress in the culture wars.

Just this year it somehow became considered racist by the aficionados to say the phrase ‘all lives matter’, and AFL and NRL footballers slavishly followed their American counterparts and took a knee in solidarity with Black Lives Matter. A better strategy is that adopted by Thomas Klingenstein and the Claremont Institute: establishing that what is at stake is nothing less than our very way of life.



Players take a knee following the Round 5 NRL match between the Parramatta Eels and Penrith Panthers, June 2020.

Source: AAP Image/Brendon Thorne

Democracy, freedom of speech, equality of opportunity and before the law, a society based on merit, reward for hard work, and respect for human dignity cannot coexist with a regime which seeks to divide populations along racial, ethnic, and gender lines, and then weaponise that division through identity politics, and censor dissent through political correctness. Only once the battlefield is understood can conservatives plot a path towards victory.