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The Knight's Move

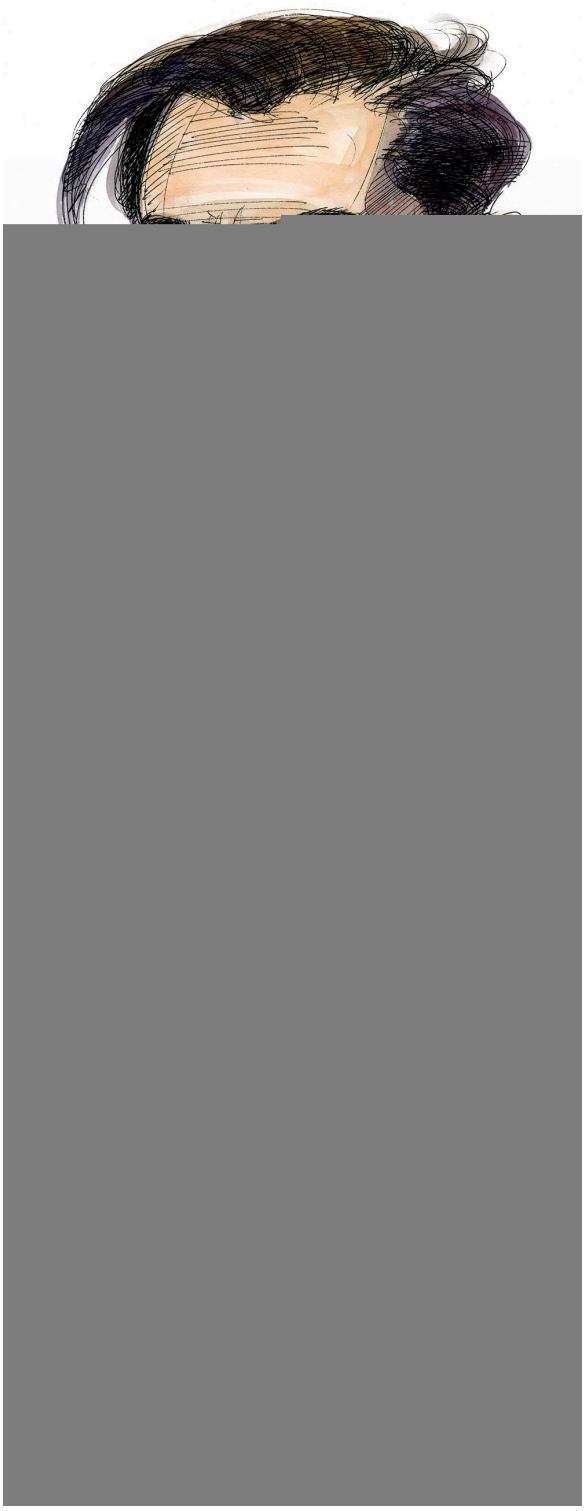
Can a new Trump-inspired intellectual magazine transcend its contradictions?

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

APRIL 19, 2017

ast February, an anonymous cohort of conservative writers, their bylines purloined from antiquity, started a group blog they described as the "first scholarly journal of radical #Trumpism." Its title—the *Journal of American Greatness*, diminutively *JAG*—advertised the project as something of a lark, and it wasn't clear how seriously the authors believed in Trump's viability as a candidate. They did agree broadly with some of his program—economic nationalism, border controls, and an "America First" foreign policy—but for the most part what excited them about Trump was his attitude toward the plummy elitism of what they called "Conservatism, Inc." Favorable attention from Peggy Noonan and *Breitbart* drove an enormous amount of traffic to the site, but just as it reached the height of its popularity, *JAG* disappeared. Its splash page explained that the whole thing had been to a large extent an "inside joke."

Some of the contributors went on to write for such long-standing conservative venues as the *Claremont Review of Books;* others seemed to retrench. When Trump actually won the election, the *JAG* contingent found themselves in a peculiar position: While they had delighted in his willingness to troll the Republican Party peerage, his persistence could only be perceived as an inconvenience. They'd welcomed his appearance on the political scene as a kind of moral disheveler, a figure like the unnamed Visitor in Pasolini's *Teorema*, who shows up on the doorstep of an uptight haut-bourgeois Milanese family, fornicates indiscriminately, and then leaves, exposing them to their own hypocrisy.



(Illustration by Victor Juhasz)

But now that Trump was president, their endgame wasn't clear: What would it even mean to form an intellectual vanguard in the service of his ideas? On the one hand, with Trump in power, they presumably felt they might be able to exert some influence. On the other hand, Trump was inconsistent, impetuous, and bragged that he didn't read. Plus, he came with a set of rather déclassé associates—Steve Bannon, Kellyanne Conway, Sebastian Gorka—who seemed likely, in their coarseness, to dishonor a set of policies that they believed might otherwise seem reasonable.

The very notion that a coherent way of political thinking might be distilled from Donald Trump was quixotic, to say the least, though not enough to prevent a set of *JAG* veterans—Julius Krein, Gladden Pappin, and James Poulos—to found a successor magazine, *American Affairs*, with Krein installed as editor. The masthead was

institutionally presentable: Krein, a native of South Dakota, was a recent Harvard graduate and a disciple of Harvey Mansfield; Pappin was a political scientist at Notre Dame; and Poulos was the author of *The Art of Being Free*, a new book on "how Alexis de Tocqueville can save us from ourselves." They had also recruited several better-known names for their advisory board, including Michael Lind and Yoram Hazony.

But it wasn't *American Affairs*' credentials that made its launch event an irresistible attraction so much as the improbability of the whole enterprise. Guests were invited for an evening cocktail hour at the Harvard Club, followed by a discussion between venture capitalist Peter Thiel and the president of the New America foundation, Anne-Marie Slaughter. Name tags were set out for (among others) Bill Kristol, Sam Tanenhaus, Peggy Noonan, Mark Lilla, Andrew Sullivan, and Rebekah Mercer, one of Trump's key backers.

Neither of the panelists—a billionaire libertarian Trump supporter from Silicon Valley and a Beltway representative of a renovated liberal internationalism—had any obvious connection to the magazine itself. But their joint presence, along with establishment figures like Kristol, Noonan, and Sullivan, seemed to be precisely the point: *American Affairs* might have started as an act of rebellion, but its founders would nevertheless try to engage with elites of all persuasions.

Was this a sign of genuine ecumenicism, or were Krein and his editorial comrades merely looking for cover? The setting of the Harvard Club seemed to confirm a suspicion of their bad faith. This was, after all, the very citadel of the establishment they purported to despise: "if Trump ends up destroying the Republican party," they had written, "it is because the Republican party, as it exists today, is little more than a jobs programme for failed academics and journalists." Had the *American Affairs* editors truly meant to do injury to the conservative ruling class with these lines—or were they to be understood as a brash and canny audition before their establishment forebears? Was their British orthography preening, ironic, or (somehow) both? In the soft beige light of the Harvard Club, the whole thing seemed little more than a demonstration that this crew of ribald young upstarts was nevertheless eminently clubbable—i.e., trustworthy stewards of movement money.

Whatever the expectations of the attendees may have been, Krein was one step ahead of them. Rather than use the event to defend his

act of provocation from charges of improbability, he saw it as an occasion to double down. Krein has nothing if not an eye for period detail, and the whole affair seemed to flaunt the queasy self-consciousness of performance art. The journal itself looked like a mid-century little magazine with its drab, perfect-bound book, its cover engraved with a crowded, poorly kerned table of contents, and its logo lettered as either a tribute to or a send-up of the austere *Foreign Affairs*. Even the finger food seemed intentionally parodic: clammy yellow appetizers and fried bits of rice and cheese that looked as though they'd been warming over a Sterno since the Eisenhower administration.

Krein began with the story of his own unlikely arrival. The previous year, he said, had been one of surprises. "Although I have been on the periphery of conservative political and intellectual activity for some time," he allowed, "I have for the most part made my career in finance and investing.... There is a saying in the investment world that success requires a combination of arrogance and humility—the arrogance to believe that you know something others don't, and the humility to know when you're wrong. It appears to me that in opinion writing, you can get by mostly on arrogance"—he paused —"and those of you who know me know that probably won't be a problem."

In a few deft strokes, Krein went on to sketch the contours of a familiar figure: a rural upbringing of unimpeachable authenticity; a stint at an Ivy League college, followed by a quick path to independent means; a hard head for finance but a heart that belonged elsewhere; and just enough self-deprecation to reassure people that he wasn't a kook. In a different moment, he might have happily continued in the blithe pursuit of his own private ends, but the political moment had summoned Krein to action: "My personal view is that we are worse off economically, strategically, and certainly intellectually."

In Krein's assessment, this wasn't simply the fault of Barack Obama or George W. Bush; it was also the result of an elite policy consensus that afflicted both parties, born of a complacent self-regard. So far, this was standard conservative boilerplate—common to Tea Party activists as well as the columns of *National Review*—but here Krein departed from tradition: Rather than citing one of the right's many anti-establishment intellectuals, he invoked instead a 1972 essay on wrestling by Roland Barthes. "Now I know that the mention of

wrestling will call to mind one particular individual"—Krein looked over coquettishly at Thiel and waited for the crowd, a little slow on the uptake, to realize he was talking about Hulk Hogan—"but the issue goes much deeper than that. Our politics, like Barthes's wrestling, has become a spectacle of excess which has no sense of time, no logic of the future." As Barthes explained it, Krein observed, "the function of the wrestler is not to win; it is to go exactly through the motions which are expected of him."

In other words, American politicians—and the intellectuals associated with them—had lost the sense of vigor that derives from shared aims. They now performed only for their own meager enrichment and vanity. What we needed to escape this inertia was a new vision of political community and a new intellectual elite to serve its articulation. At this point, Krein pivoted from Barthes to another unusual antecedent for an up-and-coming conservative: Herbert Croly, the founder of the *New Republic* and the author of *The Promise of American Life*, a manifesto that Krein believed might serve as a call to arms for the kind of unity necessary for America's political renewal.

The trajectory of Krein's introduction thus moved from standard-issue populist remonstrance to French semiotics and then to the height of American progressivism. Clearly, this would not be *The Weekly Standard* or *National Review*; Krein was open to inspiration from a wealth of available vanguards. Even so, his introduction didn't resolve the question of whether he was there to rebuke the establishment or pander to it; instead, it only intensified the event's presiding ambiguity. The strange retinue of influences and allusions, along with his self-presentation as a kind of arch pan-nostalgist (the itchy tweed, the Reagan Youth power tie, the tortoise-shell glasses) had the cumulative effect of destabilizing the litany of clichés with which Krein concluded: "The essence of the promise of American life is the future which, together, Americans are building. I think there is a lot of truth to that. However, today, I don't believe that we as Americans have any idea of what the future should be, and I think we have even less of an idea of how to build it together. My hope is that *American Affairs* can contribute something to our understanding of both."

He didn't even mention Trump once.

The establishment of a new magazine—especially one that aspires to political relevance or even power—is invariably an act of

vanity. But it's vanity of a peculiar sort, one less interested in the extension or preservation of individual ambition than in the investiture of a new community of belief. New magazines, to that end, either arise in the attempt to organize inchoate and disorderly climates of opinion, or to repudiate some other magazine's previous go at it. The *Democratic Review* was founded in 1837 in support of Jacksonian democracy, which had been discredited by America's first literary magazine, the conservative *North American Review*. The *New Republic* attempted to provide ideological structure to progressive sentiment, and *The Seven Arts*, in turn, emerged to take issue with the *New Republic*'s support for the First World War. The *Partisan Review* managed to offer both affirmation and reproach, first as a forum for the Communist Party, and later as the intellectual center of the anti-Stalinist left; it was followed by *Commentary* and *Dissent*, each reconstituting itself as the *Partisan Review*'s right and left flanks. These agonistic reversals are often generational in nature and tend to play out in predictable ways: There's the invocation of the authority of the grandparent in the attempt to slay one's parent, or the recourse to one's daffy uncle (the Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky called this the "knight's move"), by which ideas are introduced from some parallel tradition.

American Affairs clearly has a generational hue, but it remains unclear how its deviations might take actual shape. Save for the tweedy aesthetic, little about it really harks back to an earlier generation of conservative thinking, and in fact the editors have gone out of their way to distance themselves from both the neoconservative and free-market orthodoxies that have driven so much of the American right since the 1960s. Instead, they strive to position themselves as a bipartisan consensus against the bipartisan consensus (though the seriousness of this aspiration remains an open question), and they often make it clear that they dislike Dick Cheney as much as they distrust Larry Summers.

In fact, for Krein, it is exactly this opposition to what he believes Cheney and Summers have in common that gives *American Affairs* its rationale. Both are the sort of person that Krein likes to group under the catchall term "managerial elite." Such an emphasis on the "managerial elite" affords his magazine a neat pivot away from the problem of Trump and his unsavory crew to a more common complaint about the treason of the clerks. For Krein, the key to understanding what has gone wrong with American politics is not to focus on particular policies or even particular politicians, but to

consider how the ruling elite in general has betrayed its duty to cultivate a larger sense of political community and national interest. Racism and xenophobia, by his lights, are merely the distasteful but incidental symptoms of this elite abdication. As Krein puts it in *American Affairs*' mission statement: "What if the people are not too populist, but rather our elite is not truly elite? What if 'the real problem with our republic,' as Walter Russell Mead put it, 'is that what should be our leadership elite is soul-sick: vain, restless, easily miffed, intellectually confused, jealous'?"

Krein's contempt for the managerial elite is perhaps his most obvious debt to an earlier conservatism. But as he's well aware, the evolution of the concept is a bit more complicated than it might seem prima facie. After all, the critique of a technocratic ruling class descends as much from the left as it does from the right, and Krein's chief inspiration—and the subject of his essay in *American Affairs*' very first issue—is the formerly left-wing political theorist James Burnham.

Although he grew up wealthy, Burnham was radicalized by the Depression, becoming a committed Trotskyist in the 1930s. By the '40s, he'd begun to develop a new theory of elites. For Burnham, the Marxist diagnosis of capitalism was inadequate to the problems of the 20th century's corporatist state: A new form of centralized, bureaucratic power had developed, administered by an emerging class of technocrats. As Burnham saw it, this had happened in both the Soviet Union and the social-democratic and liberal countries of the West, and it required radicals to better understand a society no longer run by aristocrats or the bourgeoisie, but by a new guild of experts who lacked the responsibility—and the sense of political community—of those with proprietary stakes. This ascendant group of managers had helped to chart a course for American society since roughly the New Deal, but they were no longer meaningfully a part of it.

In the 1940s, this view of an emerging technocratic elite had led Burnham to radical politics. By the early 1950s, his lament had also become part of the right-wing attack on the role of the welfare state, and it led him, in turn, to conservatism: When William F. Buckley Jr. founded *National Review* in 1955, Burnham was one of the first to appear on its masthead. Ever the political transient, he would grow weary of the New Right, but his ideas were kept alive by a race-baiting acolyte, Samuel Francis, who combined Burnham's mistrust

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of the managerial class with George Wallace's prescription of racial solidarity—a political amalgam that found public form in Pat Buchanan's 1992 presidential campaign, which many have come to see as something of a trial run for Trump.

Krein thinks that Trump, however inarticulately, shares Burnham's view of our contemporary failures. But even though he very briefly mentions Francis—he couldn't responsibly ignore him—Krein prefers to bypass Buchanan and the Wallace-ite wing of the party, and to treat their racism as unfortunate but merely ornamental to the project that he has elected to take over from Burnham. As Krein has it: "Burnham's own writings also include a few extraneous comments on racial issues that would have to be considered, at best, typical of someone born in 1905. But the essential elements of Burnham's thought—and even much of Francis's distinctive interpretation of Burnham—have nothing to do with race."

This may be a fair argument when it comes to Burnham, but Krein's defensive aside about Francis makes clear that he thinks it's a relatively easy trick to preserve the noble impulses of right-wing populism while discarding its vile appurtenances. This, of course, was Buckley's mission as well—*National Review*'s whole raison d'être was to differentiate decent conservatism from John Birch lunacy—and has been more or less the general aim of his variegated successors, regardless of their policy preferences; Krein, however, has taken his inspiration not from Buckley but from one of his more famous apostates. It is thus incumbent on Krein to find new and creative ways to distance himself, and the Trumpian spirit, from the way the latter has been contaminated.

This is a question-begging gambit, however, as it takes as a matter of course that these things *are* separable. For Krein, the first step toward resolving the racism and xenophobia that undergird Trump's rise is simply to wish them away—or, at the least, to build a wall around them. When I asked him about Bannon, Krein winced and told me that, while most political advisers suffer from too much education, Bannon was the rare case of the opposite.

Krein's claim to ecumenicism derives in part from his awareness that his readings of the managerial elite look much more like those of C. Wright Mills, Christopher Lasch, and Thomas Frank than they do those espoused by conservatives. His knight's move, in fact, is to frequently invoke the evolving intellectual vanguard of the left to criticize the languor of both parties—a "self-worshipping clerisy

convinced that its superiority is based upon the knowledge that only it can access." He told me that one of his favorite contemporary thinkers on the left is Slavoj Zizek.

But if Krein calls upon Zizek when he wants to seem impish and politically incorrect, and upon Burnham to help burnish his anti-movement credentials, then his journal's greatest resource comes from an even more surprising source: the kind of communitarianism that one might associate with Alasdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, the early Roberto Unger, or Robert Bellah. Beginning in the late 1970s and early '80s, this group of thinkers began to offer a critique of liberalism from the left. The problem with liberal politics, they argued, was that its procedural emphasis on the rights of the sovereign individual had left modern democratic polities unable to create the feelings of solidarity and moral responsibility that derive from membership in a meaningful community.

Among the contributors to *American Affairs*' first issue, in fact, is Adam Sandel, Michael's son, a lecturer in social studies at Harvard. In an essay titled "Putting Work in Its Place," Sandel argues that "the anger with establishment politics that Trump seized upon is not only about job insecurity but a growing sense that traditional blue-collar work is no longer honored as it used to be." To better understand what has been lost, Sandel thinks we ought to look back to Hegel's emphasis on the value of work in the world. Hegel, as Sandel understands him, insisted that the sphere of politics (in which the procedural rights of citizens are paramount) and the sphere of family life (in which we are loved unconditionally) only succeed when balanced by the honest work done in the sphere of civil society, where one can achieve personal dignity via one's own specific competencies and contributions. In Sandel's telling, it is through this meaningful work that we deepen the context of both our political and private lives: It represents our distinct contribution to the public good, while providing us with the wages needed to support a family that loves us for our more personal qualities. "Participants in the economy," Sandel writes, "need to be related to institutions that represent the common good, sheltered by the guarantee of unconditional love within the family. When they are left on their own, they find themselves awash in a complex and impersonal system of labor and trade, within which they must try to gain some control."

This seems perfectly reasonable, even if we allow that there's more than a little wishful thinking in the idea that all proper families are unconditionally loving and that piecemeal mechanical work can afford one the dignity of knowing that one is making a contribution to the public good. But Sandel's essay hardly provides much in the way of a specific program, even if it culminates with a vague thought experiment in which political representation might be awarded directly to professional guilds.

The avoidance of a substantive policy program, of course, has the benefit of at least seeming nonpartisan; Sandel writes, after all, in pursuit of a value that the left also cherishes—the dignity of work. But he also manages to glorify labor, the state, and the family in the abstract, without having much to say about the history of US labor policy or unions. This tendency to render concrete policy questions into philosophical quandaries obtains for the rest of the issue as well. Krein's essay on Burnham concludes without any specific proposals, and Michael Anton's on liberal internationalism insists that "America's national interests are to pursue and promote *prosperity*, *prestige*, and *peace*," mistaking the use of italics for meaningful detail. For a magazine that bills itself as a "quarterly journal of public policy and political thought," *American Affairs* offers conspicuously little of the former.

When the editors ask, toward the end of the journal's mission statement, "Can nationalism be leavened by justice—or even be essential to it—rather than being abandoned to its worst expressions?," it is clear that they're posing the question rhetorically. Many of the contributors believe that the recovery of America's pride is not only a necessary criterion for national self-improvement—a claim with which Croly would have agreed—but a sufficient one.

Reading through *American Affairs*, one gets the sense that avoiding policy questions is as much a strategy as a politics. Krein, after all, believes that he is founding a journal of big-tent antiliberalism, and it is precisely on those policy questions that the left and the right split. While many on the left would use the state to mitigate or eradicate the excesses of capitalism, the right tends to look elsewhere for the means of social transformation.

These substantive distinctions represent different worldviews. Take, for example, Krein's most vivid example of the proliferation of the managerial elite: the financialization of the economy. For Krein, financialization is, in part, the faulty product of educations like his

own, which allowed him to study under Harvey Mansfield but nevertheless drove him toward lucre. So where the left has a specific legislative story about the origin of financialization (decades of deregulation, derivatives, stock buybacks) and how we might ameliorate its central problems, Krein has a blurry cultural story about… the universities? Such a claim represents less of a promised stride forward into the sunlit uplands of Croly's American promise than it does a step back into the culture wars of Allan Bloom and the 1990s.

Communitarianism—more a philosophical movement than anything else—provides little help here. Its advocates may long for the comfort of the good old gemeinschaft (who doesn't?), but on any salient practical level, they remain committed to the norms and procedures of liberal democracy. In addition, the solidarity that communitarians imagined in the 1980s was set forth in a pluralistic and inclusive fashion—as a set of communities whose interactions defined the public good—whereas for figures like Wallace and Buchanan, there is only one community: a polity founded on nationalist comity and the supremacy of one racial and religious group.

The *American Affairs* circle does not go this far. In fact, they frequently avoid the dilemmas of defining America's political community and instead focus on questions relating to trade and immigration. Where someone like Bannon divides the populace up into the honest and deserving and the dishonest and parasitic—and makes the latter the scapegoat of the former—Krein is more interested in the preservation of the political for a different, nonmanagerial elite. He sees the relevant distinction as being between those who ought to know better and those who don't.

In fact, it seems the closest that *American Affairs*, at least in its first issue, comes to engaging with the question of a nondiscriminatory, inclusive nationalism is in the belief that if you work to rehabilitate the elite, you perforce rehabilitate everyone: The elite, in other words, can be trusted to shape the community fairly. "The managerial elite's separation from—indeed, its destruction of—the political community is the cause of its degeneration," Krein argues near the end of his Burnham piece. "It cannot govern effectively on behalf of the American people because it cannot even conceive of an American nation." The solution, therefore, is to invigorate a new kind of elite, one that takes seriously the work of national aspiration. The

problem isn't that elites are interlopers; it's that they—like all of us—have lost sight of the common good.

In their introduction to the first issue, the editors write: "Meritocracy is perhaps the most sacrosanct principle in contemporary life. It is a soothing lullaby that we sing to ourselves to avoid responsibility for the ever more rigid socioeconomic stratification of our society. Was meritocracy fated to produce social stratification? Or are we privileging certain forms of merit while excluding others?"

Krein knows that the left is historically sympathetic to this argument, but he resists the idea that the solution might be found in the state-sponsored cultivation of human capital and the corresponding attempts to make our elite institutions more egalitarian. And he may well be right to suspect, as political thinkers from Michael Lind to Fredrik deBoer have argued, that an emphasis on egalitarian meritocracy only provides cover for a structurally broken system. But he also has a figure like Peter Thiel in mind, whose presence on the inaugural panel seemed to represent his conviction that only by empowering the *right* kind of elite can we plausibly create a sense of an inclusive national pride—one that's enabled by the endless expansion created by technological innovation. Whereas the old managerial and meritocratic elite simply exploited its monopoly on control of the old tools and replaced the old forms of inequality with new ones, a new technological elite—driven by its Promethean urge for novelty—can build new tools with its own hands. In this vision of the future, the engineer stands against the clerk as the figure immune to treason—an actor whose incorruptible drives might perhaps one day help America revive itself.

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Thiel began his own political career by founding a little magazine, *The Stanford Review*, that opposed the changes in the university's "Western Civilization" requirement, and one suspects that Krein has modeled his own ambitions on Thiel's. For Krein's purposes, a lack of imaginative detail about the contours of a future national community may not necessarily be a problem, so long as one can divine a way to establish new cohorts of Thiel-like figures to lead the country.

On this view, Krein may have gathered his audience of establishment intellectuals to serve as the butt of his performance-art piece. Beyond the balmy generalities about American renewal, it seems that his real fun-housemirror message was: Shouldn't we be trying to produce intellectuals a little more like Peter Thiel and a little less like you? Of course, the problem with this emphasis on the elite is that the important questions—the ones relating to how a new and expansive political community might coalesce, and what an inclusive America might look and sound like—are merely kicked down the road.

American Affairs may seek to help build a new post-liberal intellectual vanguard. But as long as its editors remain unwilling or unable to see Trump for what he actually is, they're setting themselves up to be little more than the plummy elite inheritors of what they claim to loathe.

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