

“*The Dying Citizen* is essential reading for any American who cares about the fate of our nation.” —**MARK R. LEVIN**

**VICTOR DAVIS HANSON**

Author of the *New York Times* bestseller *The Case for Trump*

# THE DYING CITIZEN



**How Progressive Elites,  
Tribalism, and Globalization  
Are Destroying  
the Idea of America**

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# THE DYING CITIZEN

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How Progressive Elites,  
Tribalism, and Globalization  
Are Destroying the Idea of America

VICTOR DAVIS HANSON

BASIC BOOKS  
*New York*

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# BASIC BOOKS

## Introduction

# PRE– AND POST– AMERICAN CITIZENS

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Citizenship is what makes a republic; monarchies can get along without it.  
What keeps a republic on its legs is good citizenship.

—MARK TWAIN, 1906

Today only a little more than half of the world’s seven billion people are citizens of fully consensual governments enjoying constitutionally protected freedoms. They are almost all Western—or at least they reside in nations that have become “westernized.” These realities explain why millions from North Africa risk drowning in the Mediterranean to reach Europe and why millions more uproot from Mexico and Latin America to cross the southern border of the United States. Call their exodus from their homelands a desperate quest for greater income, freedom, or security—or simply for a chance to be an unfamiliar citizen somewhere else rather than a certain serf, noncitizen, or subject at home.

Of the world’s rare true democracies, only about twenty-two have been in existence for a half century or more. Lamentably, the number of democracies is now shrinking, not growing—ironic when so many people are now leaving what is ascendant to reach what is vanishing. Perhaps that depressing fact is a reminder that it is not an easy thing for people to govern themselves, much less to protect and exercise their inherited freedoms. Citizenship, after all, is not an entitlement; it requires work. Yet too many citizens of republics, ancient and modern, come to believe that they deserve rights without assuming responsibilities—and they don’t worry how or why or from whom they inherited their privileges.<sup>1</sup>

Yet for the lucky global residents of constitutional states, citizenship has

translated into shared freedoms beyond superficial appearance. It is a quality more fundamental than a common religion and collective geography. Citizens are not mere residents, prone to receiving more than giving. They are not tribal people who band together by appearance or blood ties. They are not peasants under the control of the rich. Nor is their first allegiance to an abstract worldwide commonwealth.

Eighteenth-century German political philosopher of the Enlightenment Immanuel Kant perhaps best summed up all the exceptional entitlements that he hoped one day could define a Western citizen—at least in his own rosy expectation of an idealized European to come. Kant saw the citizen alone as enjoying “lawful freedom, the attribute of obeying no other law than that to which he has given his consent.” In other words, a king or dictator could not force his will upon those who never elected him. Kant added that citizens should be assured of “civil equality” under the law. They should not recognize “among the *people* any superior with the moral capacity to bind him as a matter of right in a way that he could not in turn bind the other.” The state cannot treat the rich, the better born, or the well-connected any better than it does the poor, the peasant, and the obscure. Finally, Kant cited “the attribute of civil *independence*.” The goal of a citizen was to “owe his existence and preservation to his own rights and powers as a member of the commonwealth, not to the choice of another among the people.” The citizen does not have to thank anyone for his rights. They are innate and properly his own.

These eighteenth-century visions of philosophers like Kant were not realized throughout Europe until the early 1990s when parliamentary democracies replaced the last dying communist regimes of Eastern Europe—more than two centuries after the foundation of American democracy. Their creators did not always keep—or even fully grasp—the promises of Western citizenship. Yet only under consensual governments was there at least *a chance* that citizenship would eventually fully match its ideals with reality.<sup>2</sup>

A free, legally equal, and politically independent citizenry, when translated to the modern American experience, means that citizens of the United States should not follow any laws other than those authorized by their own elected representatives. Unelected regulators can issue edicts galore, but they should not necessarily have the force of law. No college administrator should decide on Monday that the First Amendment no longer applies on his campus. No mayor can claim on Tuesday that federal immigration law no longer exists in her city.

No one American deserves greater deference under the law than any other—

not on the basis of race, class, gender, birth, or money; not on the basis of historic claims to justify contemporary advantage. Police and prosecutors arrest and charge lawbreakers, but not, like the pigs in *Animal Farm*, some lawbreakers more than others.

No senator or president bestows anything on an American, because he is a servant, not a master, of the people. American citizens believe that they do not owe privileges such as freedom and consensual governance to any particular political party or Democratic or Republican leader. American citizens, bearing natural and inalienable rights bestowed by a supreme deity, are accountable only to themselves.

Citizens differ from visitors, aliens, and residents passing through who are not rooted inside borders where a constitution and its laws reign supreme. For citizenship to work, the vast majority of residents must be citizens. But to become citizens, residents must be invited in on the condition of giving up their own past loyalties for those of their new hosts.

Citizenship is synonymous with our freedoms and their protection by law and custom, which transcend individual governments and transient leaders of the day. Barack Obama was still the president of those who were not fond of him, just as voters who loathed Donald Trump had no president but Trump. Neither president could nullify the Constitution or our freedoms—unless citizens themselves allowed him to do so.

In return for our rights to pick our own leaders and make our own laws, we are asked to obey America's statutes. We must honor the traditions and customs of our country. As Americans we cherish the memory of those who bequeathed to us such an exceptional nation, and we contribute our time, money, and, if need be, safety and lives on our country's behalf.

We must always ask ourselves whether as citizens we have earned what those who died at Shiloh or in the Meuse-Argonne gave us. Refusing to kneel during the national anthem or to salute the Stars and Stripes is not illegal, but it is not sustainable for the nation's privileged to sit in disgust for a flag that their betters raised under fire on Iwo Jima for others not yet born. Sometimes citizens can do as much harm to their commonwealth by violating custom and tradition as by breaking laws.

In practical terms, the US Constitution guarantees citizens security under a republic whose officials they alone choose and that assures them liberties. What exactly are these privileges? Everything from free speech, due process, and habeas corpus to the right to own and bear arms, to stand trial before a jury of

one's peers, and to vote without restrictions as to race, religion, and sex. America, then, is only as good as the citizens of any era who choose to preserve and to nourish it for one more generation. Republics are so often lost not over centuries but within a single decade.<sup>3</sup>

So far, so good. This is the idea of citizenship as it was intended and should be.

But history is not static; nor does a people always progress linearly to an improved state. Civilizations experience descents, detours, and regressions—and abrupt implosions. So citizenship can wax and wane—and abruptly vanish. History also is mostly the story of noncitizenship. In the monumental civilizations of the preindustrial world, from the Babylonians and Egyptians to the Mayans and Aztecs of the New World, no residents of the sovereign soil of a monarchy, theocracy, or autocracy enjoyed any inalienable rights. Elected representatives did not decide their fates. They enjoyed no protection by a corpus of laws, much less by independent courts. It would be hard to imagine the career of a Socrates, Sophocles, or Cicero in any of these empires, just as today most Americans would find life in China, Cuba, Iran, or Russia stifling, if not dangerous. Instead, order and law came down from on high from authoritarian hereditary, tribal, or religious rulers. The disobedient were crushed, the obsequious promoted. The code of survival demanded subservience to one's superiors and haughtiness to those deemed inferiors. The harshness of the law hinged on the relative cruelty of a particular dynast. Consensual governments did not create or ratify the ancient Babylonian law code of Hammurabi (ca. 1750 BC) and the legal edicts of Darius I of Persia (ca. 500 BC).

Usually the succession of authoritarian rulers ignored popular will—a concept that itself did not formally exist. Rulers came to power by hereditary successions, coups, revolutions, civil wars, assassinations, religious revelations, and palace intrigues—as they so often do even today outside the westernized world. Nonviolent political change was rare and usually entailed succession of rulers by children or immediate relatives.

Voting, if it existed at all, was not transparent, sacrosanct, or widespread. It still is not for over three billion people today. Even in so-called democracies, “voting” often operates under implied or direct coercion, usually in rigged and scripted elections. A sign of democratic sclerosis is a loss of confidence in the integrity of voting—to the point that it becomes seen as a futile exercise rather than a bulwark of citizenship.

In most regimes of the past, there was one set of laws for the rich, priests,

autocrats, and aristocrats and quite another for those without money, high religious or political office, or noble birth and lineage. Or those who gained power by election often sabotaged subsequent elections on the theory of “one election, one time.”

Again, citizenship came quite late to civilization. To appreciate what we Americans enjoy, we should pause to remember the long road from antiquity to our own Constitution. Consensual government did not appear until about twenty-seven hundred years ago, most prominently in Athens, twenty-five hundred years after the beginning of large urban settlements in the Near East. In much of ancient Greece, by the early seventh century BC, property-owning citizens, or *politai*, enjoyed voting rights in the consensual governments of some fifteen hundred Greek city-states (*poleis*).

At first, a minority of the residents formed broad-based oligarchies. These governments privileged about half the resident male population, mostly those who owned small farms. The landless poor were seen as without enough material investments in society to offer sound judgment—or worse, their impoverishment was deemed proof of their moral or ethical inadequacies. Sometimes such restrictive governments slowly evolved into more direct democracies in the latter fifth and fourth centuries BC, when most of the free male resident population voted and a majority vote of the assembly often decided governance.<sup>4</sup>

Once established in the early West, citizenship unleashed, as the conservative philosopher Plato lamented, a rapid evolutionary process. The trajectory always bent toward greater inclusion. So, in such self-reflective societies, the lack of full citizenship accorded to the poor in oligarchies and to slaves and women in democracies was a source of constant discussion, praise, criticism, and argumentation. What so bothered Plato and other reactionary critics of democracy was that the impulse toward inclusivity always grew without logical bounds once a society had institutionalized equality and freedom within consensual governments. Among his bleaker notions—one seemingly supported by long periods of postdemocratic history—was that an always radicalizing democracy would eventually lead to chaos and then a swing back to tyranny.

For a time, the Greek city-state became more inclusive without succumbing to anarchy. It is certainly no accident that in democratic Athens the heroes (and tragic titles as well) of most of Euripides’s plays were women—Alcestis, Andromache, Andromeda, Antigone, Hecuba, Helen, Iphigeneia, and Medea. Tragedians apparently explored the idea that when some women were stronger

or more moral than some men, and yet all were treated as political and cultural inferiors, then the logic of the polis did not hold. Nor is it odd that the crusty comic dramatist Aristophanes voiced the superior wisdom and morality of war-torn Athens through his feminist character Lysistrata, not the senior male apparatus of Athenian democracy that started and conducted the conflict. Apparently in the mind of the dramatist, when the male leadership of the city-state could not win or end a devastating war, then perhaps marginalized others could.

Long before the British and American abolitionists, Alkidamas, the fourth-century BC Elaeian orator and Athenian resident, reminded Greece of its contradictions between *eleutheria* (freedom) and *douleia* (slavery): “Nature,” Alkidamas railed, “has made no man a slave.” That declaration was no idle talking point. It would become a rallying cry that later resonated with the great Theban democratic liberator Epaminondas, who freed the Messenian helots from their indentured service to Sparta—a feat that made him preeminent among the most illustrious Greeks of the classical age. In sum, the nature of consensual government at its origins was constant self-critique and reassessment. When such perpetual introspection ceases, so does citizenship.<sup>5</sup>

By twenty-first-century standards, many today would call early Greek constitutional governments ethnocentric, nativist, and sexist. But compared to what exactly in the contemporary ancient world? Some twenty-five hundred years ago, the Greeks were remarkably enlightened and liberal by the then current standards of tribal northern Europe or in comparison with powerful dynastic civilizations in Egypt, Persia, the Near East, India, and China. There the mass of residents remained either tribesmen, serfs, subjects, or slaves without individual rights.<sup>6</sup>

By the late fifth century BC, an increasing number of native-born resident males enjoyed citizenship in most Greek city-states. They alone could decide whether to grant particular residents such privileges by decree. They had the right to speak freely in the assembly, where speech was usually far more unfettered than on contemporary American campuses. As citizens, they passed on property to their chosen female or male heirs. They stood trial in criminal and civil cases before juries of their peers. They enjoyed a sovereign country with clearly defined borders. They cherished the privilege to vote on matters of war and peace and to serve their city-state in its phalanx armies—and, in exchange, they expected the state to allow them to protect their families and farms.

Citizens of the Greek city-state also reflected the empowerment of the middle class. The *mesoi* (middle ones) of the city-states were neither noble by birth nor

condemned to poverty by either circumstance or lack of inheritance. “Middleness” (*to meson*) in thought and practice at the very beginning of the West was an innate ideal of citizenship. Much of Aristotle’s *Politics* is a historical and contemporary analysis of consensual governments of classical Greece. So, unsurprisingly, it praises middle citizens as the glue that held the entire state together, without the hubris shown the lower classes characteristic of the rich and powerful. In his encomium about the *mesoi*, Aristotle wrote,

A city ought to be composed, as far as possible, of equals and similars; and these are generally the middle classes. Wherefore the city which is composed of middle-class citizens is necessarily best governed; they are, as we say, the natural elements of a state. And this is the class of citizens which is most secure in a state, for they do not, like the poor, covet their goods.... Thus it is manifest that the best political community is formed by citizens of the middle class, and that those states are likely to be well-administered, in which the middle class is large, and larger if possible than both the other classes, or at any rate than either singly; for the addition of the middle class turns the scale, and prevents either of the extremes from being dominant. Great then is the good fortune of a state in which the citizens have a moderate and sufficient property.<sup>7</sup>

Aristotle envisions the middle class not just as morally superior to the elite but also as more stable and reliable than the poor. And a city-state governed by the middle classes is superior not just to oligarchies but also to tribal peoples, often nomadic and without permanent settlements, who define their political existence by precivilizational ties of blood and marriage.

Citizenship, then, explains the Greek achievement of drawing on the talents and energy of a much-empowered resident and middle-class population. Why and how, after all, did such a numerically small number of people in such a small space as Greece nonetheless create the foundations of Western philosophy, politics, literature, history, and science? Once protected by laws, rather than by the transitory goodwill and patronage of aristocrats and autocrats, in a practical sense the citizen has far more legal and economic latitude to paint, write, build, farm, create, discover, or litigate. There is no need for either a religious fundamentalist or an unproductive political commissar to “correct” and repress inquiry and expression, vital to the material progress, security, prosperity, and

freedom of the polis. The Athenian tragedian Aeschylus, in the final play of his *Oresteia* trilogy (458 BC), resolved the vendetta of the House of Atreus with the mythical establishment of the historical Areopagus court and, in the process, depicted the civilizing effects of law on society. If not worried about being arbitrarily jailed, killed, deprived of his property and inheritance, or told where and how to live, a citizen is more likely to exploit his own talents—and often create wealth for his commonwealth. And a free state that does not employ armies of unproductive snoops, spies, and politically correct commissars does not have its most daring and innovative minds crippled or its economy hobbled by costly hordes of unproductive trimmers.

Traditionally, philosophical supporters of the middle classes have argued that a majority of moderate property holders both encourages self-reliance, responsibility, and social stability, which are lacking in the poor, and curbs the ability of all-powerful, special interests to exercise inordinate influence on the state. In our age of deprecating “brick and mortar,” we sometimes forget that perhaps the main impetus of ancient constitutional government was the protection of widescale property holding. Edmund Burke, drawing on the classical tradition, saw the right to property as synonymous with constitutionalism: “I hope we shall never be so totally lost to all sense of the duties imposed upon us by the law of social union, as, upon any pretext of public service, to confiscate the goods of a single unoffending citizen.”

Republican Rome expanded on the Greek idea of the citizen (*civis*) in a variety of ways. The Romans codified many rights and delineated the citizen’s responsibilities. In time, those privileges and obligations became institutionalized systematically under Roman imperial and universal law—including everything from habeas corpus to a sophisticated and comprehensive digest of criminal and civil statutes and courts. Nowhere in the ancient world could women or slaves vote—despite a millennium of criticism in classical literature of such systematic discrimination as hypocritical and its rules and protocols as impractical. Most importantly, though, Roman republicanism sought to ameliorate the perceived volatility and abuses inherent in radical, and especially Athenian, democracy. Rome was more influenced by the more parochial constitution of Sparta, whose dual legislative assemblies (the Apella and Gerousia), two chief executives (parallel lines of hereditary kings), and judicial auditors (the ephors) provided checks and balances on the use of power.<sup>8</sup>

The subsequent postclassical idea of Western constitutional citizenship ebbed and flowed through periods of retrenchment, oppression, and authoritarianism.

Nevertheless, it slowly evolved through the Middle Ages, Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment toward an ever-greater array of rights and forevermore inclusion of the formerly dispossessed. The idea of equality under the law was inherently dynamic—despite preindustrial poverty ensuring a physical drudgery that curtailed political opportunities, while bearing and raising children remained a dangerous and life-consuming chore.<sup>9</sup>

By the twenty-first century, the Western idea of citizenship, after twenty-five hundred years of evolution, neared its logical fruition with the full emancipation of the poor, women, and minority populations after the long-ago abolition of serfdom, indentured peasantry, and chattel slavery. Yet, despite progressive legal efforts to extend all the rights of full citizenship to newly arrived illegal immigrants, to felons, and to teenagers not yet eighteen years old, in a practical sense the privileges of Western citizenship are, in fact, diluting. Just as there was no constitutional government before 700 BC, so there is no rule that there must be democracies and republics in the twenty-first century.

Failure can occur at any time and results more often from what we, rather than others, do to ourselves—affluence and leisure often prove more dangerous to citizenship than poverty and drudgery. In this context, one oddity of current American democratic culture is the strange habit of faulting the present-day United States for its past purportedly illiberal generations. The farther we progress from our origins, both chronologically and materially, the more we blame our founders for being less and less as anointed as we see ourselves. It is as if, when unhappy with the opulent present, we look to the impoverished past to blame our unhappiness on the dead, who faced daunting natural obstacles, rather than the living, who so often don't.

Indeed, the more political and social disparities disappear, the more they become emphasized and exaggerated—and the more the state takes responsibility for ensuring parity. Is that because the closer we arrive to full racial, ethnic, class, gender, and religious equality, the more we are damned for nearing but not quite achieving our utopian ideals? As the state ensures “equality” of opportunity, it is blamed for failing to provide “equity,” or equality of result. Or do we equate technological progress with fated and commensurate advances in changing human nature? A culture whose citizens can monitor the world with iPhones surely cannot tolerate Neanderthals who are still biased or tribal.

Amid this desire to ensure equality of result through the use of government power, Americans currently feel that something is being lost in their daily lives.

They often describe their frustrations as an attack on their very rights as citizens. In a December 2019 Harris Poll/Purple Project survey, for example, a vast majority of Americans surveyed—some 92 percent—believed that their rights were “under siege.” More specifically, the poll found that Americans are most concerned that their freedom of speech (48 percent), right to bear arms (47 percent), and right to equal justice (41 percent) are at risk.<sup>10</sup>

Earlier surveys had revealed similar discontent, especially over the decline of local autonomy in comparison with the growth of the federal government, the erosion of popular sovereignty, and fears of an expanding federal government. A 2018 Pew Research Center poll revealed, “Two-thirds of those surveyed (67%) have a favorable opinion of their local government, compared with only 35% for the federal government.” A Greek statesman of the ancient city-state might interpret such discontent as the inherent result of a government’s becoming too large and powerful.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, while Americans sense that their constitutional rights are in jeopardy, they are not always aware of what exactly they are losing. That confusion is understandable given the erosion in civic education in our schools. In a 2017 poll taken by the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg Public Policy Center, most Americans appeared ignorant of the fundamentals of the US Constitution. Thirty-seven percent could not name a single right protected by the First Amendment. Only one out of four Americans could name all three branches of government. One in three could not name any branch of government.

In a 2018 survey conducted by the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, almost 75 percent of those polled were not able to identify the thirteen original colonies. Over half had no idea whom the United States fought in World War II. Less than 25 percent knew why colonists had fought the Revolutionary War. Twelve percent thought Dwight D. Eisenhower commanded troops in the Civil War.

It is harder to lament the potential loss of constitutional freedoms when majorities of Americans willingly do not know what they are. When left-wing protesters began toppling statues in June 2020 to denounce supposed icons of racism, their target list of hallowed memorials included those commemorating the Union enforcer of Reconstruction, General Ulysses S. Grant, heroic African American veterans of the Civil War, and renowned martyred abolitionist Hans Christian Heg. Apparently the young iconoclasts learned little about the Civil War in either high school or college but a great deal about the supposed unwarranted privilege of anyone who had earned commemoration from a

supposedly racist society. Sometimes American popular ignorance manifests itself by reality mimicking art. Just as the ignorant mob in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* mistakenly and unapologetically murdered Cinna the poet rather than Cinna the tyrannicide, so in February 2019 protesters torched the statue of World War II major general William C. Lee, apparently confusing his memorial with that of Confederate general Robert E. Lee.<sup>12</sup>

Citizenship in the United States is now being pulled in *two* different and often antithetical directions, from below and above, spontaneously and yet by design, through both ignorance of and intimacy with the Constitution.

Many Americans do not know or worry much about the consequences of radical demographic, cultural, or political influences for the status of citizenship. They are indifferent to millions of immigrants of uncertain status, veritable resident strangers in their midst. Similarly, many recent immigrants and many of the native born, for example, often have little idea of how American citizenship differs from simple residency or tribal grouping. Many arrivals believe that moving to and residing in the United States without legal sanction should nonetheless guarantee them all the benefits of American citizenship. Meanwhile, far too many citizens see no need to learn about the history and traditions of the United States or the civic responsibility of being an American. The contention that their country is irrevocably flawed becomes a justification for intellectual laziness and an unwillingness to learn about America's supposedly dark origins and customs. When nearly four in ten Americans have no notion of their rights under the First Amendment, it is easy to curb them.

On the other hand, some elites believe that they know the Constitution all too well and therefore believe it in dire need of radical deletions and alterations to fit the times. They envision an always improving, changing, and evolving Constitution that should serve as a global model for a vast, ecumenical brotherhood, requiring a global administrative state to monitor and enforce its ambitious idealism. Out of this chaos, some Americans prefer to be rebranded as "citizens of the world." Oddly, that tired idea dates back to Socratic utopianism and has never offered any credible blueprint for a workable transnational state.<sup>13</sup>

So what toxic forces and pernicious ideas have brought American citizenship—a 233-year-old idea able to transcend the conditions of its birth and accept women and those of races and ethnicities different from the majority culture fully into the political commonwealth—to the brink?

I have grouped the first three chapters together under the heading "Precitizens." The notion of precitizenry reflects ancient economic, political, and

ethnic ideas and customs that were once thought antithetical to the modern democratic state. Yet, in organic fashion, they are reappearing and threaten to overwhelm the American commonwealth.

In [Chapter 1](#), “Peasants,” I review the ancient argument that to be self-governing, citizens must be economically autonomous. The Greeks defined self-sufficiency as *autarkeia*, a type of freedom from economic and thus political dependency on either the private wealthy or the state. The majority of the population cannot exercise and protect its rights of unfettered speech and behavior without the *material* security that only economic self-reliance and autonomy of the middle class ensure. Yet today the modern suburban everyman is becoming a nostalgic ideal rather than a vibrant reality. Indeed, the American middle class has lost economic ground for nearly a half century through mounting household debt, static wages, and record student-loan burdens. Without a middle class, society becomes bifurcated. It splinters into one of modern masters and peasants. In that situation, the function of government is not to ensure liberty but to subsidize the poor to avoid revolution and to exempt the wealthy, who reciprocate by enriching and empowering the governing classes.

[Chapter 2](#), “Residents,” argues that states must privilege citizens over mere residents. Citizens live within delineated and established borders. They share a common history. Their sacred physical space allows them to pursue their constitutional rights without interference from abroad. Living on common and exclusive ground encourages shared values, assimilation, and integration and defines national character. Yet we now live in an increasingly borderless world, where the notion of anyone more blessed at birth than another is seen as unfair—as if, in an age of affordable and rapid travel, an accident of birth should not deprive any of the planet’s eight billion people from entering and living in the United States. Citizenship, however, is not indestructible. The more it is stretched to include everyone, the less the likelihood it can protect anyone.

[Chapter 3](#), “Tribes,” reminds us why all citizens should give up their own ethnic, racial, and tribal *primary* identities. Only through such a brutal bargain of assimilation can they sustain a common culture in a century in which superficial racial and tribal differences, the fuel for many of history’s wars, are becoming no longer incidental but recalibrated as essential to the American character. In the absence of a collective civic sense of self, the inclusive idea of an American citizen wanes and fragments. Until the late twentieth century, the country suffered only sporadic episodes of blood and soil exclusivity and instead, usually through intermarriage and assimilation, made the idea of racial or ethnic purity

inert. Once any nation goes tribal, however, eventually even those without easily identifiable ethnic ancestries or tribal affinities seek to reconstruct or invent them, if for no other reason than to protect themselves from the inevitable violence and factionalism on the horizon. Once a man owes more loyalty to his first cousin than to a fellow citizen, a constitutional republic cannot exist.

The three chapters of the second half of the book, under the heading “Postcitizens,” focus on the even greater dangers to citizenship posed by a relatively small American elite. These “postmodernists” know all too well the history of their nation. They feel the United States should conform to a European and cosmopolitan ethos rather than pride itself in being “exceptional.” They are well versed in the Constitution and therefore write eloquently about how it should be modified and its essence irrevocably changed to birth a truly direct equality-of-result democracy. Larger government and a more commanding administrative state should guarantee a mandated “equity.” These elites believe that human nature has evolved since 1788, and the Constitution must catch up. In other words, it is now time to move beyond classical citizenship to accommodate a much different American and a now global community.

[Chapter 4](#), “Unelected,” chronicles how an unelected federal bureaucracy has absorbed much of the power of the US Congress, yearly creating more laws and regulations than the House and Senate together could debate, pass, and send to the president for signing. The permanent bureaucracy has overwhelmed even the office of the presidency. That all-powerful office often lacks sufficient knowledge to control the permanent legions deeply embedded within the state. Elected officials come and go. They proverbially rant about the “deep state.” But the bureaucracy outlasts all, knows best, and so grows and breeds, often at the expense of the citizen. We are reaching a point similar to the rise of a fictive robotic terminator that destroys its too human creators, as the bureaucratic elite believes that it can and should preempt any elected official who deems it dangerous. If the citizen cannot elect officials to audit, control, or remove the unelected, then he has lost his sovereign power.

“Evolutionaries,” the subject of [Chapter 5](#), are the unapologetic grand architects of dismantling constitutional citizenship, inordinately represented by political activists, media grandees, the legal profession, and academics. As progressives, they feel Americans are currently stymied by an eighteenth-century constitutional albatross strung around their necks, one far too redolent of old, white, male, Christian values that supposedly have no relevance today. They accuse the Founders of lacking our modern wisdom, today’s enlightened

education, and the benefits of a constantly improving, innate human nature. The evolutionaries are not shy in explaining why the Constitution, along with centuries-old traditions that followed from it, are now either inert or obstructive or both. We must formally scrap and replace many such fossilized concepts and even founding documents, they insist, from the Electoral College to the Second Amendment to the Senate filibuster to a nine-person Supreme Court to two senators for every state. If perceived as impediments to progress, then by all means the current calcified rules can be changed or eliminated altogether, in a trajectory toward a 51 percent, majority-vote-rules nation, without sufficient constitutional and long-accustomed guardrails.

A final [Chapter 6](#), “Globalists,” explains the current fad that Americans are transitioning into citizens of the world. An ancient but unworkable idea of cosmopolitanism has reemerged, now driven by privileged utopians empowered by twenty-first-century global travel, finance, and communications. In the cynical sense, they rarely suffer from the real consequences of their own impractical ideas, given that their American-generated power, wealth, and influence largely exempt them from their edicts, which fall so hard on the middle and lower classes—be it overregulating the economy in pursuit of environmental agendas or sacrificing the interests of American workers to foreign commercial and trade predation. On the one hand, they are cynical critics of American exceptionalism and nationalism. On the other, they wish to extend American-style democracy and liberal tolerance across the globe—but without much thought about where such singular ideas arose or why so much of the world has always resisted them. Globalism’s chief characteristic, however, is more mundane. Its architects focus on the distant and anonymous abroad, less so on concrete Americans nearby—as if theorizing about such misdemeanors as the use of plastic bags or natural gas use abroad can compensate for the failure to address the felonies of American homelessness, eroding wages, drug epidemics, and crushing student debt in their midst. In the end, globalization may not westernize the planet so much as internationalize America.

In sum, I wish to explain why everything that we once thought was so strong, so familiar, and so reassuring about America has been dissipating for some time. The year 2020, in the manner of other revolutionary years, such as 1848, 1917, and 1968, has peeled away that veneer of complacency and self-satisfaction. Contemporary events have reminded Americans that their citizenship is fragile and teetering on the abyss—and yet the calamities can also teach, indeed energize, them to rebuild and recover what they have lost.

Part 1

# PRECITIZENS

## Chapter One

# PEASANTS

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There are three groups of people. There are the rich who are never satisfied because their wealth is never enough for them—these citizens are totally useless for the city. Then there are the poor who, because their daily bread is never enough, are dangerous because they are deceived by the tongues of crooked politicians and by their own envy and so they aim the arrows of their hatred towards the rich. And then, between these two, there is a third. This one is between them. It's there to keep the order, it's there to keep the city safe.

—EURIPIDES, *Suppliants*

The English word “peasant” comes from the Old Anglo-French word *paisant*, derived from the Latin *pagus* (rural district). “Peasant” originally denoted a subservient rural resident or laborer of inferior rank.

It is understandable why the word has been rarely used in American English—other than as a condescending putdown akin to “rustic” or “boor.” After all, Americans had millions of arable acres on their frontier. The government for over seventy years of serial Homestead Acts (1862–1930) believed in granting such free land to those who would work and improve it—and thus become a stable, independent, and responsible middle class. So when “peasant” is used today in the American context, we must think away the anachronistic images of peasantry as stooped farmworkers burdened by rents and shares to absentee landowners.

Instead, for purposes of comparison, focus on the larger economic landscape

of the medieval European peasants. Theirs was a world in which much of the population was dependent on an overclass of lords, barons, and bishops for its sustenance (and that is often true to this day in parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America). They had little hope of upward mobility or even autonomy. Peasants then were like neither independent American agrarians nor autonomous yeomen.

The modern use of the word identifies the erosion of the middle class into an indebted and less independent underclass. The current reality is that millions of Americans, through debt, joblessness, and declining wages, are now becoming our own updated urban and suburban versions of the rural European peasantry of the past.

The idea that, without a middle class, there can be little participatory democracy, social tranquility, or cultural stability is not new. It is a poignant lesson from our shared past. The so-called middle ones (*mesoi*) of ancient Greece, referred to in the introduction, emerged out of the Greek Dark Age (ca. 1150–800 BC) as viable farmers of small orchards, vineyards, and grain fields. Legal citizenship, in its beginning, reflected the growing desires of these small yeomen farmers to protect and pass on to their children their property. Land ownership was the perceived font of all their rights and autonomy. Citizenship would have been impossible without this *prior* material security and independence.

The agrarians (*georgoi*) of many Greek city-states were the near majority of the resident population. They also owned and bore their own weapons. By intent their military-grade arms and armor *transcended* the need for personal safety or hunting. Quite logically, the first citizens of the West soon determined the very conditions under which their city-state’s militias marched as hoplite infantry in the phalanx to defend their polis. This revolutionary right of the citizens to bear *top-grade arms*—currently the most controversial amendment of America’s Bill of Rights—and to determine when, where, and against whom they would fight was also synonymous with citizenship at the very beginning of the West.

Perhaps most importantly, the new middling citizens assumed that as self-sufficient producers of food, they enjoyed economic independence from both the urban rich and poor. In the Greek philosopher Aristotle’s analyses, once armed, moderate property holders became the majority in the city-state. Only then did consensual government for the first time become possible.<sup>1</sup>

A chauvinistic cult of “middleness” propaganda proclaimed the *mesoi* morally superior by their singular virtue of working physically while taking on the burden of self-government. Drudgery in service to others was the predictable

lot of the poor, idleness, the cargo of the rich. But hard work for oneself was enshrined as the supposed superior middle way. Families responsible for their own futures would be the best guardians of the democratic state. As the Greek poet Phokylides (mid-sixth century BC) put it, “Much good is there to the middle ones: I would wish to be midmost in a city.”

The Greeks’ attitude toward the rich was not one of mere resentment or envy but rather a chauvinism that the wealthy, like the poor, possessed neither the requisite skills and weaponry nor the people’s trust to anchor the polis. The poor could not afford the armor of hoplite infantrymen; the rich were perched on ponies. The middle ones alone were infantrymen, the armored spearmen of the phalanx—and the voices of when and when not to go to war. Too much land made one indolent. Yet no land ensured poverty and its twin, jealousy. On average, about ten acres—of olives, vines, and grain—ensured economic and political self-sufficiency. The cult of middleness spread throughout the more than fifteen hundred Greek city-states and later became the foundational assumption of the agrarian Roman Republic.<sup>2</sup>

There were plenty of indentured servants and helots in a few of the more backward Greek city-states. Chattel slaves—their status based on unlucky birth or the bad luck of wartime capture rather than race—were found in most. Nonetheless, an idea was born of both freedom and equality among the citizens whose natural evolutionary logic was always toward ever greater egalitarianism and inclusivity. Among the poleis of fifth-century BC Greece, the ancient idea of a “peasant”—a rustic permanently tied to the land as a renter or sharecropper without political rights and freedom—was thus superseded.

In the serf’s place arose the new notion of a citizen. He soon coined an iconic name: *politês*, or “city-state person.” *Polis* and *politês* were later to spawn an entire array of English constitutional terms such as “politics,” “politician,” “political,” “policy,” and “police.” Contrary to popular assumption, there is simply no word for “peasant” in the classical Greek vocabulary of the city-state. But there are plenty of such terms in ancient Greek pre-polis and atypical regions, such as the indentured *helotai* of Sparta and the *penestai* of Thessaly.<sup>3</sup>

Again, the classical traditions of the Roman Republic followed Hellenic precedent. Small agrarian Italian soldiers, the famed legionaries of Rome, became the foundation of a republic to ensure political rights predicated on their economic viability and martial prowess—a paradigm found nowhere else in the Mediterranean. The Roman *civis* (cf. “civil,” “civic,” “civilization,” etc.), or citizen, was the beneficiary of rights codified in an extensive body of law.

Legal protection for the *civis* against arbitrary arrest, confiscation, or taxation ensured the value of citizenship. Indeed, later, throughout the Roman-controlled Mediterranean, echoed the republican-era boast *civis Romanus sum*—“I am a Roman citizen.” The speaker, if he was so fortunate as to live inside the boundaries of Rome’s growing dominions, was entitled to rights that transcended those of both transient foreigners and mere permanent residents within Roman lands. Empowerment was again the key: give a citizen equality under the law, freedom, and economic viability, and his talents will bloom and enrich the state at large.<sup>4</sup>

In the second and third centuries AD, the Italian middle that had built the republic gradually over a millennium largely vanished. Rome increasingly became an empire of two classes, rich and poor, without much of a viable voting middle in between or indeed any national voting at all. The world’s first experiment with globalization (in this case, the *Mare Nostrum*, the Roman Mediterranean) eventually hollowed out the Roman agrarian and middle classes.

Sending landowning agrarian legionaries far abroad to conquer new territory (our version of “optional overseas wars”) in turn supplied foreign slaves for the consolidation of Italian agriculture in their absence. Agrarianism, remember, was thought to be the backbone of the preindustrial middle class. The independence of the small farmer and his need to combine brain and muscle to produce food were considered to offer vital traits for self-governance, from pragmatism to individualism. Unfortunately, the once agrarian legions gradually either became mercenary or were manned by those without a stake in Roman society. To keep ruling, the elite relied on sending public largess to the army and to the poor, the stereotypical “bread and circuses” (*panem et circenses*) of the poet Juvenal, who caricatured the urban and often idle masses kept afloat by the combinations of state-subsidized food and free entertainment.

Yet, even after the collapse of the classical world in the latter fifth century AD and the transitory disappearance of a vestigial middle class, the idea of Western broad-based citizenship never quite died. Instead it reemerged in various manifestations throughout Europe over the next millennium and a half. The sometimes waxing, sometimes waning agrarian classes sought to create a constitutional state to protect and reflect their own interests. Unlike the landless poor, they did not want redistributions of someone else’s land and money. In contrast to the wealthy, they did not see government mainly as an auxiliary to maintain privileges of birth or as an adornment to express influence and power.<sup>5</sup>

This reappearing European ideal of an independent middle class, originally

agrarian, rather than a subservient peasantry became the American ideal, at least until recently. All politicians still praise the middle class, but few recently have sought or found ways to preserve it in a radically changing globalized world. The result is the emergence of a new American peasantry, of millions of Americans who own little or no property. The new majority has scant, if any, savings. Fifty-eight percent of Americans have less than \$1,000 in the bank. A missed paycheck renders them destitute, completely unable to service sizable debt. Most of what they buy, from cars to electronic appurtenances, they charge on credit cards. The average charge card indebtedness is over \$8,000 per household and over \$2,000 per individual—paid through monthly installments at average annual interest rates of between 15 and 19 percent, at a time when most home mortgages are usually below 4 percent.

Such short-term debt is often roughly commensurate with the payments and share-cropping arrangements that premodern peasants once entered into with lords and made it impossible for the serf to exercise political independence or hope for upward mobility. The chief contemporary difference, of course, is that the modern American peasant is the beneficiary of a sophisticated technological society that allows him instant communications, advanced health care, televised and computer-driven entertainment, inexpensive food, and a social welfare state. These material blessings often mask an otherwise shrinking middle class without confidence that it is in control of its own destiny.

A fifth of America receives direct government public assistance. Well over half the country depends on some sort of state subsidy or government transfer money, explaining why about 60 percent of Americans collect more payments from the government than they pay out in various federal income taxes, in various health care entitlements, tax credits and exemptions, federally backed student and commercial loans, housing supplementals, food subsidies, disability and unemployment assistance, and legal help.

Such social insulation, along with science fueled by free market capitalism, has succeeded in ending starvation, dying in one's thirties and forties, and, for the most part, chronic malnourishment, as well as ensured access to a wealth of material appurtenances. But otherwise, twenty-first-century American "peasants"—currently perhaps about 46 percent of the population—usually die with a net worth of less than \$10,000, both receiving and bequeathing little, if any, inheritance.

Drive on El Camino Real on the perimeter of Stanford University's elite campus and witness hundreds living in curbside trailers in the manner of the