

IT'S STILL A MAD, MAD CALIFORNIA

by Victor Davis Hanson// National Review

Coastal elites set rules for others, exempt themselves, and tolerate rampant lawlessness from illegal aliens.

One reason for the emergence of outsider Donald Trump is the old outrage that elites seldom experience the consequences of their own ideologically driven agendas.

Hypocrisy, when coupled with sanctimoniousness, grates people like few other human transgressions: Barack Obama opposing charter schools for the inner city as he puts his own children in Washington's toniest prep schools, or Bay Area greens suing to stop contracted irrigation water from Sierra reservoirs, even as they count on the Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy project to deliver crystal-clear mountain water to their San Francisco taps.

The American progressive elite relies on its influence, education, money, and cultural privilege to exempt itself from the bad schools, unassimilated immigrant communities, dangerous neighborhoods, crime waves, and general impoverishment that are so often the logical consequences of its own policies — consequences for others, that is. Abstract idealism on behalf of the distant is a powerful psychological narcotic that allows caring progressives to dull the guilt they feel about their own privilege and riches.

Nowhere is this paradox truer than in California, a dysfunctional natural paradise in which a group of coastal and governing magnificoes virtue-signal from the world's most exclusive and beautiful enclaves. The state is currently experiencing another perfect storm of increased crime, decreased incarceration, still ongoing illegal immigration, and record poverty. All that is energized by a strapped middle class that is still fleeing the overregulated and overtaxed state, while the arriving poor take their places in hopes of generous entitlements, jobs servicing the elite, and government employment.

Pebble Beach or La Jolla is as far from Madera or Mendota as Mars is from Earth. The elite coastal strip appreciates California's bifurcated two-class reality, at least in the way that the lords of the Middle Ages treasured their era's fossilized divisions. Manoralism ensured that peasants remained obedient, dependent, and useful serfs; meanwhile, the masters praised their supposedly enlightened feudal system even as they sought exemptions for their sins from the medieval Church. And without a middle class, the masters had no fear that uncouth others would want their own scaled-down versions of castles and moats.

Go to a U-Haul trailer franchise in the state. The rental-trailer-return rates of going into California are a fraction of those going out. Surely never in civilization's history have so many been so willing to leave a natural paradise.

Yet collate that fact with the skyrocketing cost of high-demand housing along a 400-mile coastal corridor. The apparent paradox is no paradox: Frustrated Californians of the interior of the state without money and who cannot afford to move to the coastal communities of Santa Monica or Santa Barbara (the entire middle class of the non-coast) are leaving for low-tax refuges out of state — in “if I cannot afford the coast, then on to Idaho” fashion. The state's economy and housing are moribund in places like Stockton and Tulare, the stagnation being the logical result of the policies of the governing class that would never live there. Meanwhile, the coastal creed is that Facebook, Apple,

Hollywood, and Stanford will virtually feed us, 3-D print our gas, or discover apps to provide wood and stone for our homes.

Crime rates are going up again in California, sometimes dramatically so. In Los Angeles, various sorts of robberies, assaults, and homicide rose between 5 and 10 percent over 2015; since 2014, violent crime has skyrocketed by 38 percent. This May, California's association of police chiefs complained that since the passage of Proposition 47 — which reclassified supposedly “nonserious” crimes as misdemeanors and kept hundreds of thousands of convicted criminals out of jail — crime rates in population centers of more than 100,000 have increased more than 15 percent. California governor Jerry Brown has let out more parolees — including over 2,000 serving life sentences — than any recent governor.

How does that translate to the streets far distant from Brentwood or Atherton?

Let me narrate a recent two-week period in navigating the outlands of Fresno County. A few days ago my neighbor down the road asked whether I had put any outgoing mail in our town's drive-by blue federal mailbox, adjacent to the downtown Post Office. I had. And he had, too—to have it delivered a few hours later to his home in scraps, with the checks missing, by a good Samaritan. She had collected the torn envelopes with his return address scattered along the street. I'm still waiting to see whether my own bills got collected before the thieves struck the box.

Most of us in rural California go into town to mail our letters, because our rural boxes have been vandalized by gangs so frequently that it is suicidal to mail anything from home. (Many of us now have armored, bullet-proof locked boxes for incoming mail).

On the same day last week, when I was driving outside our farm, I saw a commercial van stopped on the side of the road on the family property, with the logo of a furniture- and carpet-cleaner company emblazoned on the side. The driver was methodically pumping out the day's effluvia into the orchard. When I approached him, he assured me in broken English that there was “no problem — all organic.” When I insisted he stop the pumping, given that the waste water smelled of solvents, he politely replied, “Okay, already, I'm almost done.” When it looked as if things might further deteriorate, the nice-enough polluter agreed to stop.

In the interior of green California, it is considered rude or worse to ask otherwise pleasant people not to pump out their solvent water on the side of the road. Down the road, I saw the morning's new trash littered on the roadway — open bags of diapers and junk mail. Apparently California's new postmodern law barring incorrect plastic grocery bags (and indeed barring free paper grocery bags) has not yet cleaned up our premodern roadsides. Remember: California knows it dare not enforce laws against trash-throwing in rural California; that's too politically incorrect and would be impossible to enforce anyway. Instead, it charges shoppers for their bags. In California, the neglect of the felony requires the rigid prosecution of the misdemeanor.

I was in my truck — and suddenly I felt blessed that I was lucky enough to have it. Last summer it was stolen from a restaurant parking lot in Fresno when my son borrowed it to go to dinner. The truck was found four days later, still operable but with the ignition console torn apart and the interior ruined, amid the stench of trash, marijuana butts, beer bottles, waste, and paper plates still full of stale rice.

During this same recent 14-day period, my wife stopped at her office condo in Fresno to print out a document. She left the garage door open to the driveway for ten minutes. Ten minutes is a lifetime in the calculus of California thievery. Her relatively new hybrid bicycle was immediately stolen by a fleet-footed thief. I noted to her that recent parolees often walk around the streets until they can afford

to buy or manage to steal a car — and therefore for a time like bikes like hers. That same week, her bank notified her that her credit card was canceled — after numerous charges at fast-food franchises showed up in Texas. Cardinal rule in California: Be careful in paying for anything with a credit card, because the number is often stolen and sold off.

I thought things had been getting better until these awful two weeks. One-third of a mile down my rural street, in the last 24 months, at least the swat team crashed a drug/prostitution/fencing operation hidden in a persimmon orchard. The house across the street from that operation was later surrounded by law enforcement to root out gang members. Forest fires started by undocumented-alien pot growers were down in the nearby Sierra. I hadn't lost copper wire from a pump in two years.

I once also thought the proof of American civilization was predicated on three assumptions: One could confidently mail a letter in a federal postal box on the street; one in extremis could find safe, excellent care in an emergency room; and one could visit a local DMV office to easily clear up a state error.

None are any longer true. I'll never put another letter in a U.S. postal box, unless I'm in places like Carmel or Atherton that are in the Other California.

Two years ago, I was delivered by ambulance to a local emergency room after a severe bike accident; on fully waking up, I saw a uniformed police officer standing next to my bed to protect fellow ER patients from the patient in the next cubicle — a felon who had punched his fist through a car window in a failed burglary attempt and who was now being visited by his gang-member relatives.

Not long ago, the DMV did not send me the necessary license sticker. Online reservations were booked up. So I made the mistake of visiting the local regional office without an appointment, where I first got my license 47 years ago — the office then was a model of efficiency and professionalism. A half-century later, a line hundreds of feet long snaked out the door. The office is designated as a DMV center for licensing illegal aliens. The entire office, in the linguistic and operational sense, is recalibrated to assist those who are here illegally and to make it difficult if not impossible for citizens to use it as we did in the past. After 20 minutes, when the line had hardly moved, I left.

What makes the law-abiding leave California is not just the sanctimoniousness, the high taxes, or the criminality. It is always the insult added to injury. We suffer not only from the highest basket of income, sales, and gas taxes in the nation, but also from nearly the worst schools and infrastructure. We have the costliest entitlements and the most entitled. We have the largest number of billionaires and the largest number of impoverished, both in real numbers and as a percentage of the state population.

California crime likewise reflects the California paradox of two states: a coastal elite and everyone else. California is the most contentious, overregulated, and postmodern state in the Union, and also the most feral and 19th-century.

On my rural street are two residences not far apart. In one, shacks dot the lot. There are dozens of port-a-potties, wrecked cars, and unlicensed and unvaccinated dogs — all untouched by the huge tentacles of the state's regulatory octopus.

Nearby, another owner is being regulated to death, as he tries to rebuild a small burned house: His well, after 30 years, is suddenly discovered by the state to be in violation, under a new regulation governing the allowed distance between his well and his leach line; so he drills another costly well. Then his neighbor's agricultural well is suddenly discovered by the state regulators to be too close as well, so he breaks up sections of his expensive new leach line. After a new septic system was built by a licensed contractor and a new well was drilled by a licensed well-driller, he has after a year —

\$40,000 poorer — still not been permitted to even start to rebuild his 900-square-foot house.

In the former case, the owner of port-a-potties and shacks clearly cannot pay and belongs to an exempt class of the Other. The latter owner is a rare law-abiding Californian, and so he has a regulatory target on his back — because he is someone of the vanishing middle class who can and will do and pay as ordered. He is an endangered species whose revenue-raising torment is necessary to exempt others from the same ordeal.

In feral California, we suffer not just from too many and too few applications of the law, but from the unequal enforcement of it. When the state has one-fourth of its population born in another country, dozens of sanctuary cities exempt from federal law, and millions residing here illegally, it makes politicized cost-benefit choices.

Feral California out here is a live-and-let-live place, a libertarian's dream (or nightmare). The staggering costs for its illegality are made up by the shrinking few who nod as they always have and follow the law in all its now-scary manifestations.

The rich on the coast tune out. From her nest in Rancho Mirage, a desert oasis created by costly water transfers, outgoing senator Barbara Boxer rails about water transfers. When Jerry Brown leaves his governorship, he will not live in Bakersfield but probably in hip Grass Valley. High crime, the flight of small businesses, and water shortages cannot bound the fences of Nancy Pelosi's Palladian villa or the security barriers and walls of Mark Zuckerberg and other Silicon Valley billionaires — who press for more regulation, and for more compassion for the oppressed, but always from a distance and always from the medieval assumption that their money and privilege exempt them from the consequences of their idealism. There is no such thing as an open border for a neighbor of Mr. Zuckerberg or of Ms. Pelosi.

A final window into the California pathology: Most of the most strident Californians who decry Trump's various proposed walls insist on them for their own residences.