

DOUBLE ISSUE

JULY/AUGUST 2021

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on the “White Jew” lie

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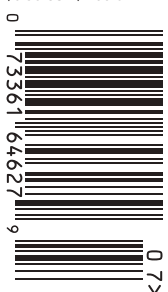
Leftists Run Amok

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on the maverick they hate

Ronald Radosh
on Ethel Rosenberg

James Kirchick on
Ben Rhodes

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READER COMMENTARY

Countering China

To the Editor:

HAL BRANDS wrote a very thought-provoking article that lays out a clear picture of the rise of China, its strengths and weaknesses, and the types of responses needed for the U.S. to address the various challenges posed by China's rise ("China's Creative Challenge—and the Threat to America," May). The one place where the author seems to go too far, however, is in suggesting that China is seeking hegemony. It seems that what China wants is to find an equal place at the table where the global agenda is set and the rules are made. Simply stated, Beijing no longer feels it must accept the rules and norms as defined by the U.S. China wants a more pluralistic

international order that reflects its growing power and influence in international affairs. In this way, it can assert its interests and not be constantly leaned on to succumb to U.S. pressures in addressing global issues.

DENIS SIMON,
SENIOR ADVISER TO THE
PRESIDENT FOR CHINA AFFAIRS,
DUKE UNIVERSITY
Durham, North Carolina



To the Editor:

WHAT HAL BRANDS'S article misses is that China encourages competition and capitalism, whereas the U.S. has become skep-

tical about these things and insistent that they are primarily unfair to everyone. As a result, we are becoming lazy and noncompetitive in many fields.

Thus, our graduate engineering schools, for example, are full of Chinese who learn from Americans and then go home to build a better Chinese economy. My son was in graduate school for engineering a few years back and a Chinese graduate student asked him what he was doing there. He had heard, after all, that Americans are too lazy to study engineering.

GARY ROSEN
Ft. Lauderdale, Florida



The Jews of Bergen- Belsen

To the Editor:

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK'S article brought me to tears ("The Nation of the Dry Bones," May). I shed tears of sadness reading about the mom who survived the Holocaust but who thanked God for "the great privilege" of being able to bury her own daughter. And I shed tears of joy reading about the bride clothed in a British parachute. I am once again reminded why we need to support and defend the State of Israel. We have a moral obligation to protect the safe haven for Jews all over the world who face anti-Semitism and persecution. And we have a practical obligation to stand by the only democracy in the Middle East. I was taught by my father at a young age that "those who bless Israel will be blessed." May America always be a blessing to Israel and be blessed for it. Thanks to COMMENTARY for the special perspective it provides its readers.

DON BACON,
BRIG. GEN. (RETIRED),
CONGRESSMAN,
SECOND DISTRICT OF NEBRASKA



To the Editor:

THE DEATH-CAMP ovens are not ancient history, and, today,

Commentary

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there are defenders and apologists of them. These people wish to see the destruction of Israel and the slaughter of its Jews for a whole litany of supposed crimes.

Fortunately, we Jews have a land and a means to defend ourselves. It is well that Israel remembers its Shoah dead, a week later, the

dead who fell in the defense of the Homeland, and the next day, after so much sorrow, we rejoice in our independence on our Land.

RAFI MAROM
Haifa, Israel



Changes in Saudi Arabia

To the Editor:

JONATHAN Schanzer's great article about the United States and Saudi Arabia is the work of someone who really understands what's going on ("Diplomatic Arson in the Middle East," May). Perhaps the U.S. doesn't want Saudi Arabia to prosper economically for fear that other countries in the region will follow suit, especially now that MBS has opened things up socially and economically.

NASSER ALHUMAIID
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia



Jonathan Schanzer writes:

IN the weeks since this piece appeared in the pages of COMMENTARY, Saudi Arabia has launched a grassroots effort in Washington and around the country to cultivate support for the Kingdom. Saudi crown prince Mohammed Bin Salman recently lambasted the hardline religious establishment—the Wahhabi institutions and clerics—in his own country. The continued marginalization of extremists is a very positive sign

for the Kingdom. Meanwhile, Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud spoke several times with Secretary of State Antony Blinken during the course of the Gaza conflict. Blinken thanked Saudi Arabia for playing a positive role in helping to broker a cease-fire. At the same time, however, troubling reports suggest that Riyadh is conducting diplomatic outreach to the Islamic Republic of Iran, an apparent gesture in response to the Biden administration's efforts to reengage in the flawed 2015 Iran nuclear deal. Saudi Arabia must tread carefully here. Riyadh's failure to uphold its own principles in countering the world's most prolific state sponsor of terrorism could undermine its leadership across the region. Patience, tenacity, and adherence to the reforms already underway—not appeasement—will ultimately guide Saudi Arabia out of the current crisis with Washington.



Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Heroine

To the Editor:

WHAT A LOVELY article by Brian Stewart ("Ayaan Hirsi Ali vs. the Mob," May). I doubt it will be read by many progressives or considered by journalists currently employed at places like the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, CNN, MSNBC, or similar outlets in Europe. They avoid the entire discussion of the betrayal of women by the left and instead engage in the obscenity of labelling as Islamophobic all criticism of Islamism. It's far easier to defend backward chauvinists and attack Israel—whose successful record on women's rights cannot even be compared with the record of other Middle Eastern countries.

RICHARD SHERWIN
Herzliya, Israel



To the Editor:

READING Brian Stewart's article, it's interesting to consider that postmodern liberals say all cultures are equal. Thus, when confronted with the abuse of women so prevalent in Muslim cultures, liberal disapproval falls, not on the oppressive culture, but on those who'd condemn it. It is the latter group that is accused of hate, intolerance, bigotry, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and racism. Upholding the equality of all cultures requires tolerance and indulgence of atrocities.

JIM AUSTIN
Crestline, California

Victim Journalists

To the Editor:

WHAT AN EXCELLENT article from Christine Rosen (“Help! Help! We’re Being Oppressed!” May). I am not myself in media, but it might interest you to know that I can see the same phenomenon at work here in Germany. Criticism of any kind is often considered an attack, a violation of a “safe space,” or an “upsetting experience” that should come with a “trigger warning.” If you add to this the inflammatory use of words such as “attack” or “assault”—which seem to cover everything nowadays, from actual physical attacks to verbal insults—public discourse in the age of social media has become

a minefield littered with emotional bombs waiting to be detonated.

TOBIAS BUDKE
Rheine, Germany



Christine Rosen writes:

I APPRECIATE Tobias Budke’s letter, although it is disheartening to hear that America is now exporting pernicious concepts such as the expansion of “safe spaces” and the elevation of emotional experience over factual knowledge in the public sphere. Mr. Budke also makes an important observation—which I think should serve as a warning—

with regard to language.

The appeal to abstractions seen in the use of phrases such as “structural racism,” the now-trendy use of the word “bodies” rather than “people,” and ubiquitous claims about “white supremacy” weaken rather than inform our national conversation. Their use is becoming more popular because they are effective tools for silencing debate, not because they offer greater clarity or insight into complex issues. Disagreements used to be the beginning of something—a debate, a conversation, a vigorous intellectual feud—but when one side deems the other irredeemably racist or sexist or transphobic or imperialist, all opportunity for honest discussion ceases. If one side views the other as evil or malign, how can compromise or persuasion happen? And at a time of polarized politics and declining faith in institutions, we need media that foster complicated conversations, rather than merely regurgitating the ideologically trendy argument of the day.



TECH COMMENTARY

The Lab-Leak-Theory Cover-Up

JAMES B. MEIGS

SOMEDAY WE will stop talking about the lab leak theory and maybe even admit its racist roots. But alas, that day is not yet here,” a writer named Apoorva Mandavilli recently posted on Twitter. It would have been easy to scroll right past the comment—Twitter is full of people ranting about COVID and calling everyone racist—but for the writer’s Twitter bio: “Reporter @nytimes on mainly #covid19.” Later that day, the *Times* reporter took down her tweet, saying it had been “badly phrased.” The day in question was May 26, 2021. The mounting evidence that the COVID-19 coronavirus escaped from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, rather than spontaneously emerging from nature, had become the hottest topic in journalism and potentially the most consequential science story in a generation.

If researchers had manipulated the SARS-CoV-2 virus to be more virulent, and then that virus had escaped the lab, it would mean the pandemic was arguably the worst manmade disaster in history. (A slightly less creepy—but still horrifying—possibility: COVID-19 is caused by a naturally occurring virus that happened to leak while being studied at the Wuhan In-

stitute.) Many observers have compared the accident to the Chernobyl meltdown, another high-tech screw-up compounded by government deceit. But, with a global death toll likely to approach 4 million, a Wuhan lab leak, if it did in fact occur, would be perhaps 10,000 times deadlier than the Ukraine nuclear accident.

For a science journalist, helping figure out the true genesis of this catastrophe would be the opportunity of a lifetime. And yet here was one of the *New York Times*’ top pandemic reporters fretting that too many people were interested in the question. In a way, you can understand her frustration. Elite institutions and media outlets had been trying to get people to “stop talking about the lab leak theory” for over a year. From their perspective, the issue was raised by the wrong sort of people—including Arkansas Republican Senator Tom Cotton and President Donald Trump—and giving the story oxygen might mean lending credence to conservative talking points. Moreover, focusing on China’s sloppy research practices and possible cover-up would distract the public from the media’s preferred COVID narratives: Trump’s incompetence, racial injustice, and red-state recklessness. Desperate to avoid those risks, media outlets, health organizations, government agencies, even the scientific community labored seemingly in concert to discount the lab-leak possibility and discredit anyone who raised it.

JAMES B. MEIGS *is the former editor of Popular Mechanics, among other magazines, and a co-host of the How Do We Fix It podcast.*

But, to the frustration of gatekeepers like Mandavilli, evidence that COVID-19 did originate at the Wuhan Institute of Virology keeps getting stronger. In recent months, there has been one bombshell disclosure after another. Even some scientists who initially pooh-pooed the idea are now demanding an investigation.

The dam is breaking. And with the surging floodwaters, comes a stunning realization: Almost across the board, our elite institutions got the most important question about COVID wrong. Worse, they worked furiously to discourage anyone else from getting it right. The leading scientific experts turned out to be spinning the truth. Our public-health officials put their political agenda ahead of any scientific mandate. And the press and social-media giants eagerly played along, enforcing strict rules about which COVID topics were acceptable and which had to be banished from the national conversation.

During the Trump years, we heard a lot of hand-wringing about the public's unwarranted "distrust" of our society's designated experts and leaders. But to be trusted, people and institutions have to be *trustworthy*. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed a profound corruption at the heart of our expert class. The impact of that revelation will reverberate for years to come.

Interestingly, the idea that the virus might have leaked from a lab wasn't particularly controversial in the early weeks of the pandemic. Initially, no one thought it was "racist" to note the coincidence that a disease caused by a virus similar to ones found in Chinese bats just happened to emerge at the doorstep of the world's top laboratory devoted to studying...Chinese bat viruses. But once Senator Cotton brought up the possibility in a January 2020 Senate hearing, the lab-leak notion had to be squelched.

Our country's most esteemed media outlets moved as one. First, they twisted Cotton's question. He had said we should investigate *whether* an accidental leak had occurred. But the *Washington Post* suggested that Cotton had called COVID-19 a deliberately released bioweapon. It was all downhill from there: Politifact labelled that idea a "pants-on-fire" lie. The *Post* accused the senator of "fanning the embers of a conspiracy theory that has already been debunked by experts." Slate attributed the notion to "good old-fashioned racism."

Overnight, the self-appointed fact-checkers all agreed that the lab-leak question was "a lunatic conspiracy theory," as Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting put it last year. Of course, that meant anyone who raised the question couldn't simply be searching for the truth—such a person had to have a political

agenda. When Trump mentioned "the theory from the lab," last April, CNN's John Harwood concluded that the president was "looking for ways to deflect blame for the performance of his administration." In an interview on CBS, China's ambassador to the U.S., Cui Tiankai, showed a surgical deftness in manipulating elite American opinion: He cagily warned that pursuing lab-leak questions "will fan up racial discrimination, xenophobia."

Our leading institutions took their cue, universally declaring that the Wuhan theory wasn't just incorrect but dangerous and malicious. The World Health Organization called the spread of the idea an "infodemic" of misinformation. Social-media platforms tweaked their algorithms to ensure that these dangerous notions wouldn't infect the defenseless population. When a *New York Post* opinion writer raised the possibility of a lab leak, Facebook slapped a "False Information" alert on the piece and made it impossible to share. Facebook also warned it would throttle the accounts of any users who persisted in spreading such *wrongthink*, ensuring that any dissenters from the approved COVID talking points would fade into the social-media background.

It almost worked.

For nearly a year, mainstream news outlets barely mentioned the lab-leak hypothesis (except to ridicule it). The scientific community, too, largely banished the topic. In February 2020, a group of 27 eminent virologists had published a statement in the influential medical journal the *Lancet*, soundly rejecting the idea that the virus might have emerged from a lab rather than passing to humans from bats or some other animal. "We stand together to strongly condemn conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin," the scientists wrote. One of the organizers of that letter was Peter Daszak, an epidemiologist and president of the EcoHealth Alliance, a group that helps distribute federal grant money to researchers studying viruses. Not surprisingly, discussions about a potential lab leak tapered off dramatically. Working scientists' careers depend on getting their papers published and winning research grants. How many want to contradict the biggest names in their fields? Only later did it emerge that Daszak's EcoHealth Alliance had funneled some U.S. government research money to the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Daszak's efforts to shut down debate on the question of that lab's role in the disaster entailed a massive conflict of interest.

Perhaps most disturbing was the response of the U.S. intelligence community. Two different teams in the U.S. government—one working out of the State

Department, the other under the direction of the National Security Council—were tasked with examining the origins of the outbreak. According to a blockbuster investigation by *Vanity Fair* reporter Katherine Eban, those researchers faced intense pushback from within their own bureaucracies. Four former State Department officials told Eban they had been repeatedly advised “not to open a ‘Pandora’s Box.’”

In particular, they were urged not to reveal the role the U.S. government might have played in helping fund the Wuhan Institute of Virology’s controversial “gain-of-function” projects. Gain-of-function research involves manipulating potentially dangerous viruses to see if they might more easily infect human cells. Advocates, including Peter Daszak, say the process can help scientists anticipate future outbreaks and possibly develop vaccines. Critics say, “It’s like looking for a gas leak with a lighted match,” as Rutgers professor of chemistry and chemical biology Richard Ebright told Eban. Either way, the possibility that U.S. research grants might have helped finance the creation of a super-virus was a revelation some members of the intelligence establishment were loath to see exposed.

Despite the resistance, the State Department team uncovered some stunning intelligence supporting the leak hypothesis. In particular, researchers discovered that three WIV scientists studying coronaviruses had fallen ill in November 2019 and had gone to the hospital with COVID-like symptoms. The first confirmed cases of COVID-19 began erupting around Wuhan less than a month later. In the chaotic last days of the Trump administration, the State Department released a vague statement about its Wuhan finding, but the news didn’t gain much traction at the time. Then the incoming Biden administration promptly disbanded the State Department’s Wuhan team.

The whole investigation into COVID-19’s origins might have petered out at that moment. The story of why the line of inquiry survived is not an account of leading scientists and health organizations dutifully parsing the evidence. Instead, it is largely the story of little-known researchers—many working outside the bounds of elite institutions—who didn’t let the political implications of their findings derail their efforts. Much of what we know today about the Wuhan Insti-

tute’s risky research is thanks to these independent skeptics who challenged the institutional consensus. Some risked their careers to do so.

One key group was an international assortment of independent researchers—few of whom were established virologists—that self-assembled on the Internet. The group called itself the Decentralized Radical Autonomous Search Team Investigating COVID-19, or DRASTIC. The name made them sound like a band of online gamers, but the group diligently uncovered a series of damning facts. Defenders of the Wuhan Institute often describe the lab as a virtually

fail-safe Biosafety Level 4 facility. But one DRASTIC researcher discovered that much of the work at the Wuhan lab was performed at lower levels—BSL-3 or even BSL-2, a degree of protection similar to that in a dentist’s office. Another showed that SARS viruses had previously leaked from China’s top research labs with alarming regularity. “The DRASTIC people are doing better research than the U.S. government,” a State Department investigator told *Vanity Fair*.

Alina Chan, a young molecular biologist and postdoctoral fellow at the Broad Institute of Harvard and MIT, was particularly fearless in challenging the premature consensus laid down by the elders in her field. She zeroed in on the virus’s genetic structure. If the virus had gradually evolved to target humans, those changes should have left traces in the ge-

nome. Instead, SARS-CoV-2 appeared “pre-adapted to human transmission,” she wrote in May 2020. Other researchers confirmed that the virus contains a particular genomic sequence that doesn’t typically occur naturally in this family of viruses but that is commonly inserted during gain-of-function research. By early 2021, these sorts of revelations were building into a compelling argument that the virus emerged from the Wuhan lab. Meanwhile, researchers trying to find the natural “reservoir” of the virus—in bats or some other animal—were coming up shockingly empty.

Throughout the pandemic we’ve often heard admonitions to “follow the science.” Looking back we can see that few scientists—and even fewer journalists—really did. *60 Minutes*, which aired a skeptical report on the WHO’s milquetoast COVID-origin investigation,

The story of why the line of inquiry into COVID-19 survived is not an account of leading scientists and health organizations dutifully parsing the evidence. Instead, it is largely the story of little-known researchers—many working outside the bounds of elite institutions—who didn’t let the political implications of their findings derail their efforts.

was a rare exception. But most journalists who aggressively pursued the Wuhan story tended to work slightly outside the mainstream. In January 2021, Nicholson Baker—a novelist, rather than an established science writer—published “The Lab-Leak Hypothesis” in *New York* magazine. In May, former *New York Times* science writer Nicholas Wade published a massively detailed argument for the theory on the self-publishing website Medium. Wade (who has faced criticism on the left for his writings on genetics and race) quoted Nobel Prize-winning microbiologist David Baltimore saying that a specific genetic modification at the virus’s “furin cleavage site” was “the smoking gun for the origin of the virus.” Two weeks later, Donald G. McNeil Jr.—who was humiliatingly forced out of the *Times* last year due to his perceived violations of woke etiquette—posted on Medium a piece entitled “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Lab-Leak Theory.”

Notice the irony here: While two refugees from the *New York Times* were publishing deep, well-reported articles on an alternative outlet, the *Times* itself was still mostly ignoring the Wuhan-lab story. And one of its current pandemic specialists, Apoorva Mandavilli, was on Twitter urging everyone to “stop talking about the lab leak.” Fortunately, people didn’t stop talking. The lab-leak hypothesis had moved into the mainstream. Scientists and journalists could finally discuss it without fear of excommunication. Facing mounting pressure, the Biden administration reversed course on May 26, announcing it had asked U.S. intelligence agencies to investigate the “two likely scenarios” for the virus’s origin. But so much damage had already been done.

When the pandemic hit last year, we were all urged to fall in line and listen to the authorities. Scientists and bureaucrats were elevated to near-divine status. “Let us pray, now, for science,” *Times* tech columnist Farhad Manjoo wrote last February. “Pray for reason, rigor and expertise.... Pray for the N.I.H. and the C.D.C. Pray for the W.H.O.” Now the public is waking up to the fact that, prayers notwithstanding, those institutions largely failed us. The WHO kowtowed to China’s deceptions. Anthony Fauci trimmed his public statements to fit the prevailing political winds. Some

of the nation’s top virologists didn’t just dismiss the lab-leak possibility, they appeared to be covering up their own involvement with Wuhan gain-of-function research. Journalists and social-media companies conspired to suppress legitimate questions about a disease that was killing thousands of Americans each day.

We may never get complete confirmation that the virus emerged from the Wuhan Institute; certainly, China will never allow an honest investigation. But the idea that the virus resulted from scientific research—and that some U.S. scientists then tried to hide their involvement—is already gaining acceptance with the public. How will Americans react to this perceived betrayal? Not well, I’m afraid. “We may very well see the expert-worshipping values of modern liberalism go up in a fireball of public anger,” writes Thomas Frank. The financial crisis of 2008 triggered widespread suspicion of elite institutions and free markets, burning over political ground that eventually became fertile for both Bernie Sanders and Trump. If the public concludes that COVID-19 was, in effect, an inside job, the political fallout could last a generation. I don’t mean people will believe the virus was deliberately released—although far too many *will* embrace that idea—but that they will see the disease as a product of an elite power structure that behaves recklessly and evades responsibility.

It would be tempting to cheer on a populist uprising against elite expertise and institutions. But that would be a tragic mistake. The vast majority of scientists, health-care institutions—even many public officials—did vital heroic during the pandemic. Just look at those miraculous vaccines! Moreover, we can’t survive in a complex and dangerous world without expertise. Replacing today’s expert class with conspiracy theorists, anti-vax charlatans, and populist mountebanks might satisfy the public’s anger for a time. But it would only make our society more vulnerable—to domestic unrest, pandemics, you name it. Can we reform the institutions that failed us? Can they reform themselves, perhaps to be more humble, more attuned to facts and less focused on power? I wish I could say I’m optimistic. 🍷



WASHINGTON COMMENTARY

Manchin Goes Rogue

MATTHEW CONTINETTI

HISTORIANS will record that the great Democratic meltdown of 2021 began on Sunday, June 6, when Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia wrote an op-ed for the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*. In his piece, Manchin reiterated his support for filibuster rules that require 60 senators to end debate and proceed to a final vote on most legislation. And he restated his opposition to the For the People Act, the constitutional monstrosity that House Democrats passed on a party-line vote in March and that Chuck Schumer has promised to bring to the floor of the Senate with dispatch.

The left was not pleased with Manchin. Jemele Hill of the *Atlantic* called him a “clown” and a “power-hungry white dude” who was upholding “white supremacy.” *New York* magazine published a blog that attempted to poke holes in what the headline called “Joe Manchin’s Incoherent Case for Letting Republicans Destroy Democracy.” The spokeswoman for Senator Richard Durbin of Illinois deleted a Tweet that said, “I don’t think our founding fathers anticipated the survival of this democratic experiment to rest in the hands of a man who lives in a houseboat.” Freshman Democratic congressman Jamaal Bowman of New York said Manchin is the “new Mitch McConnell.” (He meant this as an insult.) House whip James Clyburn likened Manchin to Emperor Nero. “What we have is a modern-day fiddling around in the Senate, and this

democracy is on fire,” he told CNN.

But these denunciations were just as ineffective as previous attempts to bully Manchin by calling the filibuster racist. By sunset on June 7, Democrats on Capitol Hill were conceding to reporters that the supermajority requirement was secure for now, that the For the People Act was dead in its current form, and that the rest of President Biden’s agenda was—well, pretty much up in the air.

“Where possible, Mr. Biden will have to use executive actions to achieve many of his goals, such as reimposing strict regulations on power plants, automobiles, and trucks to combat climate change,” wrote Jonathan Weisman and Katie Rogers of the *New York Times*. The president who had been touted as the new FDR only a few months ago suddenly looked a lot like his former, less world-historical boss. In January 2015, when the GOP assumed full control of Congress, President Obama was left with just a “pen and a phone” to advance his agenda. It didn’t go far. Obama was a lame duck.

Of course, as of this writing, Biden’s party still controls Congress. Barely. And because Democrats hold 50 seats in the Senate, they still can use the parliamentary procedure known as reconciliation to pass tax and spending bills on a simple majority. For Vice President Kamala Harris to cast the tie-breaking vote, however, all 50 Democrats must stand united. That’s what happened, for example, during the roll call for the \$2 trillion American Rescue Plan, though in the end Senator Dan Sullivan’s absence from the floor ren-

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dered Harris's presence unnecessary.

Things get much more complicated, though, with Biden's \$2 trillion American Jobs Plan. The White House would like to reach a deal with 10 Republicans, but no one is really brimming with optimism that such a compromise will happen. If it does not, then Biden will be back at square one. "Should Democrats and Republicans fail to broker a deal," wrote Mike DeBonis and Sean Sullivan of the *Washington Post*, "the White House will need every Democratic senator to rally behind the infrastructure bill on a party-line vote, making Manchin a pivotal figure capable of making or breaking a centerpiece of the Biden agenda."

And so, midway through his 10th year in the Senate, Joe Manchin finds himself the linchpin of a wobbly Democratic majority. It was probably inevitable that he would attain this position. No one better exemplifies the realignment of voters by educational attainment that has transformed American politics over the past several decades. Manchin is that rarest of creatures, a genuine political unicorn, who has somehow managed to remain both a Democrat and an elected official in a state that Donald Trump won by 43 points in 2016 and 39 points in 2020.

It hasn't been easy. Manchin's victory margins have seesawed ever since he won reelection as governor in 2008 by 44 points. He won a special election to the Senate in 2010 by 11 points, was elected again in 2012 by 24 points, and earned a full term in 2018 by just 4 points. He represents a state filled to bursting with the non-college-educated white voters who have abandoned the Democratic Party in droves, but whose support Democrats cannot afford to lose by too much, lest the donkey go the way of the dodo.

Naturally, blue-state liberals take Manchin for granted. They alternate between happiness when he gives them a majority and ferocity when he acts like a red-state Democrat. It's a pattern Republicans are familiar with. Consider the opprobrium hurled in Susan Collins's direction whenever she deviates from the true course set by the Freedom Caucus. And recall the presidential fury that greeted the late John McCain's "thumbs down" on Obamacare repeal in the summer of 2017.

The McCain comparison is telling. Whenever the Arizona senator broke from conservatives, the commentariat lavished him with praise. "Senator John McCain is a man of his word and a true hero," Rob Reiner tweeted after McCain voted against repeal. "Compassion and heart wins the day." Back then, Jemele Hill was a happy camper, reveling in the GOP's disappointment. It wasn't McCain's independence of mind, commitment to legislative procedure, or bipar-

tisan idealism that Reiner and Hill celebrated. It was his rescue of a Democratic entitlement—his effectual support, in this instance, for the progressive agenda.

The press labeled McCain a "maverick," a charming "rogue," when he embraced liberal positions on campaign-finance reform and immigration. Not so Manchin, who supposedly lives in "a make-believe wonderland" where he experiences "hallucinations," according to *Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson. Manchin is the "Senate's Walter Mitty," who suffers from "straight-up delusion," wrote Robinson's colleague James Downie. "Joe Manchin is prepared to be remembered by history as the senator who did little more than hope as his country's democracy unraveled," wrote Steve Benen of MSNBC.

A former Obama aide named Dan Pfeiffer saved the worst insult of all for Manchin's ally, Senator Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona. She's a Democrat from a purplish state who also supports the filibuster. In his Substack newsletter Pfeiffer wrote that Sinema is "more Joe Lieberman than John McCain."

Now that's harsh.

On the progressive left there is nothing worse than finding oneself compared to Lieberman, the four-term Democratic senator from Connecticut and former vice-presidential nominee. Unlike the other Democrats who voted to authorize war against Saddam Hussein, Lieberman continued to support the intervention in Iraq even after it became unpopular. For his troubles, he lost a 2006 Senate primary to Ned Lamont (now Connecticut's governor) but won the general election anyway as an Independent who continued to caucus with the Democrats. Lieberman stuck by his principles and retired under his own volition in 2012. Only in an addled liberal imagination does this seem like a tragic or ghastly fate.

The real enemy of the progressives is neither Manchin nor Sinema. It's math. The country is far less left-wing than the neighborhoods where woke journalists and socialist Squad members reside. For decades, the two parties have been close to a stalemate. The difference between Democratic or Republican control of the United States is often less than 100,000 votes. What gives Joe Manchin his power is the brittleness of the current Democratic majority.

It's something Democrats ought to keep in mind. Twenty years ago, in a fit of pique, Jim Jeffords of Vermont switched parties and handed the Democrats control of the Senate. Four years ago, West Virginia governor Jim Justice became a Republican less than a year into his first term. The next time Joe Manchin goes rogue, liberals may pay a far higher price than the For the People Act. 🐘



MEDIA COMMENTARY

How the Media Ignore Jew-Haters

CHRISTINE ROSEN

IF YOU GOOGLE the term “anti-Semitism,” the search engine returns a straightforward definition: “Hostility to or prejudice against Jewish people.” By this definition, it is beyond doubt that the statement “Jews have an insatiable appetite for war and killing” is anti-Semitic; replace “Jews” with any other race or ethnic group and there would be no argument about it.

But while Google offers a clear definition online of anti-Semitism, it is much more confused about the matter among its employees. How else to explain, as Alana Goodman of the *Free Beacon* first reported, that Kamau Bobb, Google’s head of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, continues to be employed at the company after saying in a 2007 blog post that Jews have an “insatiable appetite for war” and an “insensitivity to the suffering [of] others.”

The post was published on Bobb’s personal blog, which he used as a platform for his views as recently as April 2021 and on which he identified himself as a Google employee. Those facts suggest he felt certain that there would be no professional risk either at the university where he was working when he wrote the post or later at Google for saying that Jews should feel “tormented” by their support of Israel. He was right. Google either didn’t bother to check his published statements before hiring him, or it didn’t care.

The latter appears to be the case since the sentiments Bobb expressed leave no room for doubt about

his anti-Semitism. The post is an exercise in moral preening, with Bobb telling Jews how he thinks they should feel: “If I were a Jew today, my sensibilities would be tormented. I would find it increasingly difficult to reconcile the long cycles of oppression that Jewish people have endured and the insatiable appetite for vengeful violence that Israel, my homeland, has now acquired.”

If these statements weren’t clear enough, Bobb noted that he was writing them on the anniversary of Kristallnacht, and he drew a comparison between Israel’s defense of itself and the Nazis. Because nothing says “inclusion” like telling Jews that the Holocaust was merely a teachable moment.

Google didn’t see this as a teachable moment for Google, that’s for sure. Bobb was not fired for his remarks, despite the fact that, as head of diversity and the person who helps set inclusion policies for a global technology behemoth, he should be held to a higher standard of behavior than his underlings. He was merely reassigned, and, as the BBC reported, Google issued a boilerplate PR statement: “We unequivocally condemn the past writings by a member of our diversity team that are causing deep offense and pain to members of our Jewish community.”

According to the *New York Post*, Bobb also sent a private email to Jewish employees at Google apologizing for the hurt he caused, although not for his views about the Middle East, in which he showed he was allergic not only to honest self-evaluation but also to proper capitalization. “What I wrote crudely

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characterized the entire Jewish community. what was intended as a critique of particular military action fed into antisemitic tropes and prejudice. i think we can all agree, there is no easy solution to this situation. but that's beside the point. the way I expressed my views on that conflict were hurtful."

This slap on the wrist and let-the-healing-begin approach by Google is in stark contrast to the one it took with engineer James Damore in 2017. Damore, you will recall, committed the unforgivable sin of participating in an internal company chat about diversity and hiring practices during which he suggested that men and women might have different interests and aptitudes that might lead them to pursue different fields of study and professional careers. He also noted that Google was an ideological echo chamber that nurtured an unhealthy "shaming culture and the possibility of being fired" for anyone expressing divergent views.

How right he was. Damore *was* fired, and in a letter to staff, Google CEO Sundar Pichai said that he had been let go because "to suggest a group of our colleagues have traits that make them less biologically suited to that work is offensive and not OK." Damore later sued Google (the case was dropped after Damore and Google came to an undisclosed agreement in 2020). But the Damore situation sparked a great deal of mainstream-media coverage and hand-wringing about white male privilege.

Participating in an internal company debate where one raises questions about the overreach and claims of diversity training will get you fired; but publishing slurs about Jews? That merits only reassignment, which shows that Google's devotion to diversity is predicated on whether or not the person speaking is part of a protected progressive class—and whether or not the perceived target is viewed as deserving of progressive scorn. Perhaps, like the Catholic Church and its pedophile priests, Google deems itself a powerful enough institution that it too can protect its archbishops by reassigning rather than removing them, so long as they are acolytes of the new woke religion. Heretics, on the other hand, will face the fire.

This is consistent with the progressive left's general approach to diversity and justice questions, and its willingness to treat anti-Semites with benign neglect because Jews are seen as "white-adjacent" or not as high on the victimization totem pole as other groups. It's not as if companies like Google haven't been enthusiastic supporters of other diversity initiatives.

In the wake of George Floyd's killing in 2020, Google issued a lengthy statement outlining its commitments to racial equity in hiring and promotion as well as the money and support it had promised to the

Black Lives Matter movement. Yet Google has said nothing about the recent spike in anti-Semitic violence, including brutal beatings of Jews on the streets of American cities, despite the fact that Jews are the targets of hate crimes in the U.S. far more frequently than other racial or religious groups.

Part of that has to do with the fact that Google's workforce is progressive, particularly on matters related to Israel: According to The Verge, some members of the Jewish group at Google to whom Bobb privately apologized claim that the group itself "was not a safe space to express anti-Zionist beliefs," and they formed their own anti-Israel splinter group. That group demanded that Pichai make a public statement condemning Israel's response to the recent Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel that would include "direct recognition of the harm done to Palestinians by Israeli military and gang violence." Not surprisingly, no pressure was placed on Pichai to condemn Hamas's terrorism, which directly targeted Israeli civilians. The letter further demanded funding for Palestinian causes and "termination of contracts with institutions that support Israeli violations of Palestinian rights, such as the Israeli Defense Forces."

Google's inconsistent application of its own supposed principles of diversity and inclusion should be more widely known, but the mainstream media long ago accepted uncritically the notion that anything labeled an effort at fostering diversity cannot and should not be questioned—unless the diversity is ideological. Thus James Damore, a white man, is fair game for dismissal by Google for criticizing diversity dogma, and his story is widely discussed; Kamau Bobb, a black man, remains protected by his institution for his anti-Semitism, and his behavior is barely mentioned in the press. Which is why, as of this writing, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and most other mainstream-media outlets that avidly covered the Damore case have completely ignored the Kamau Bobb story. They employ their own Kamau Bobbs, and that is sufficient for them to cast a blind eye on the matter.

Although appeals to "diversity" are ubiquitous in corporate America, there is little consensus among Americans about what, exactly, diversity means—and little incentive on the part of woke executives or the mainstream media to find out. As the internal contradictions of intersectionality continue to reveal themselves, perhaps the media could spend less time on self-congratulatory reporting of its own "moral clarity" on race and more actual reporting on the hypocrisies embedded in our culture's pursuit of those things that Kamau Bobb's former title claimed he represented: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. 🍌



JEWISH COMMENTARY

How Chancellor Kurz Redeemed Vienna

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

AS HAMAS FIRED missile after missile into Israel, the Internet was inundated with celebrity condemnations of the Jewish state and misinformation from the media. Yet one pro-Israel image strikingly stood out: a picture of the Israeli flag flying proudly from the central house of government in Vienna. This was done at the order of Austria's chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, who explained in a tweet that it was intended as a "sign of solidarity with Israel" while it was under threat. "The terrorist attacks on Israel," he further wrote, "are to be condemned by the strongest possible terms! Together we stand by Israel's side."

For Benjamin Haddad, writing in *Foreign Policy*, the raising of the Zionist flag heralded a possible realignment between Europe and Israel. After decades of insisting that only through the "peace process"

could Israeli amity with the Arab nations be achieved, Europe may be realizing that the Abraham Accords suggest another path. Europeans now understand, Haddad further argues, that they too face a terrorist threat and "have increasingly associated Israel as a country facing similar challenges, the canary in the coalmine for European democracies."

Such a realignment would certainly be good news, but at the same time, Sebastian Kurz stands out. While Israel reacted negatively when Kurz's original coalition contained one historically anti-Semitic party, the 34-year-old has emerged as a chancellor dedicated to not only fighting anti-Semitism but embracing Zionism. One former leader of Vienna's Jewish community told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that from his first visit to Israel, Kurz "fell in love with the country." In Austria, the JTA further reported, "Kurz's pro-Israel policies offer him few political dividends, but he adheres to them in any case because of his convictions and values."

Given this, Kurz's celebration of the Israeli flag in the Austrian capital bears a unique and profound

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The Israeli flag flying proudly from the central house of government in Vienna.

poetry. For it can be said that it was Vienna where the roots of Nazism can first be found; moreover, it was the unique anti-Semitism of Vienna that was part of what inspired Zionism in the first place. By all accounts, it is Austria's history that drives Kurz's pro-Israel posture today, and we too must understand his country's past if we are to appreciate the meaning of what he has done in the present.

In 1895, Theodore Herzl, working as a journalist in Paris, returned home to Vienna and found the city in the midst of a mayoral election that would be won by the charismatic Karl Lueger, known to his admirers as "Der Schone Karl." Lueger would come to be seen as the man who would change Vienna, reconfigure it into an embodiment of modernity, technology, and beautiful gardens, which is why he is celebrated to this day in the city's Karl Lueger Square.

But Lueger would herald the coming 20th century in another, more ominous manner: He demagogically described the Jews as a cabal controlling Europe and as the central threat facing European civilization. "The influence of the masses," Lueger inveighed in one speech, "is in the hands of the Jews, the greater part of the press is in their hands, by far the largest part of all capital and, in particular high finance, is in Jewish hands, and in this respect the Jews operate a terrorism that could hardly be worse." Austria's goal, Lueger argued, must be "liberating Christian people from the hegemony of Jewry."

Lueger's anti-Semitic diatribes earned him the adulation of the Austrian masses, among them a young man by the name of Adolf Hitler who studied in Vienna during the mayor's administration. Hitler would cite Lueger as his role model and make special mention of Der Schone Karl in his own memoir, *Mein Kampf*: "I regard this man as the greatest German mayor of all time. If Dr. Karl Lueger had lived in Germany, he would have been ranked among the great minds of our people." Knowing this lends an extraordinarily eerie perspective to Herzl's own description in his diary of Karl Lueger on the hustings:

Municipal elections in Vienna took place the day before Rosh Hashanah eve. The anti-Semites won all the mandates. The mood among the Jews is desperate. The propaganda against them has whipped up a lot of hatred among the Christians.... On Election Day I was in Leopoldstadt outside the polling place, to take a closer look at all the hate and anger.... In front of the polling place a silent tense crowd. Suddenly Dr. Lueger stepped out into the square. Wild cheers, women waving white kerchiefs from the windows. The police held the crowd back. Next to me, someone said, with tender warmth but in a quiet voice: This is our Führer.

“More actually than any declamations and outbursts,” Herzl further reflected, “it was this phrase that proved to me how deeply anti-Semitism is entrenched in the hearts of these people.” It was at this moment that Herzl’s dream of a Jewish state was born.

It is often assumed that it was the Dreyfus affair that inspired Herzl’s vision, but in fact, as Rick Richman has noted, Herzl had originally assumed Dreyfus’s guilt, and he had dismissed French anti-Semitism as a mere “salon for the castoffs.” In contrast, Richman writes, “Vienna was Herzl’s home, the capital of the Hapsburg empire, the heart of Central European high culture, where a Jewish population nearly twice as large as that of all of France resided.” These Austrian Jews, who had given so much to their country, “were being accused of polluting the culture they had for a century longed to join, and not simply by a benighted clergy but by politicians and the populace at large, in a democratic election.”

Thus it can be said that, in 1895, Vienna’s leader taught Hitler his insidious craft and also inspired Herzl’s Zionist dream. Others had already written of a restored Jewish society, but Herzl became convinced that only as a genuinely political movement could Zionism succeed. “What,” Herzl wrote immediately after Lueger’s election, “is a flag? A pole and a piece of cloth? No Sir. A flag is greater than this. With a flag people are led to where you want, even to the chosen land. For a flag, people live and die. It is the one thing people are willing to die for.”

We are now able to understand the meaning of

what it meant to fly the Zionist flag in the city that taught Hitler the power of hate and the city that taught Herzl the importance of Jewish nationalism. In a speech to American Jews, Kurz argued that Austria’s history “guides my political work today,” reminding him that “we have to be a strong partner of Israel.” By

By flying the Israeli flag, Chancellor Sebastian Kurz communicated that Vienna faces a choice: to stand with the locus of living Jewry, or to stand with Hamas, the heirs of the Nazis’ quest for genocide of the Jewish people. And in the end, Kurz reminds his fellow leaders that this is a choice faced by all of Europe.

flying the Israeli flag, Kurz communicated that Vienna faces a choice: to stand with the locus of living Jewry, or to stand with Hamas, the heirs of the Nazis’ quest for genocide of the Jewish people.

And in the end, Kurz reminds his fellow leaders that this is a choice faced by all of Europe. Writing from Paris, Michel Gurfinkel recently reflected how, throughout the continent, ostentatious memorials to the Holocaust are erected, as Europe mourns “its lost dead Jews of yesterday, whose murder it variously perpetrated, abetted, or (with exceptions) found it could put up with.” Gurfinkel summarizes the European approach in a stark sentence: “To the dead Jews of yesterday, everything; to the living Jews of today, little and littler.”

But not, at least for one moment, in Vienna, where a chancellor in the city stood side by side with the state that was born in the mind of a Viennese Jew and hung Herzl’s flag from the edifice embodying his administration. It is too soon to tell whether the realignment described by Haddad is to endure, but if there is to be a better future in Euro-Israel relations, it will be because Sebastian Kurz has helped show the way. 🇮🇱

No, Jews Aren't White

We're our own thing, and whatever privilege we possess is conditional

By Liel Leibovitz

MANY YEARS ago, I moved from my native Israel to New York, and because I had no cash and no clue, I spent my days helping out at a friend's hardware store. Not really being the handy type, I cared less about the power tools on display and the customers who craved them and more about a certain young woman working the cash register. This provoked the ire of a fellow worker, who felt slighted that this foreigner should prance into his turf and so brazenly attempt to mate with the females. And so, one day, in the break room, the gentleman decided to mark his territory.

To understand fully what happened next, you

should know that he was black. With a spring in his step, my rival got very close and stared at me menacingly. I looked at him dumbfounded, for a few long moments, at a loss as to what was supposed to happen next. I'd been in fights before, and I knew that when someone was jonesing to start one, he usually pushed or shoved or threw a punch or did something to let the other fellow know the game was afoot. My rival, however, was just standing there, glaring at me as I did at him. Confused, I said the first thing that came to my mind. It was this: "Is that supposed to scare me?"

My voice must've conveyed that I was genuinely curious, since I asked it without a touch of bravado or mockery. And something softened in my colleague's face. "Well," he said, looking a bit sheepish, "yeah."

"Does it usually work?" I asked.

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In the bad Kabuki theater of U.S. race relations, real issues remain obscured stage right and left while heavily painted grotesqueries jump around and shout, eager for attention.

“Yes,” he said.

“Is it because you’re black and you think I’m white and I’m afraid of you?”

My colleague was smiling now. “You know it.”

“Weird,” I said, smiling widely, too. Then we both went out for pizza, and my new friend told me about growing up and watching white American kids, including some who were much bigger and stronger than he, cower whenever he approached, convinced that he possessed both the intention and the ability to hurt them somehow and for whatever reason.

This was my introduction to the bad Kabuki theater of contemporary American race relations, in which real issues remain obscured stage right and left while heavily painted grotesqueries jump around and shout, eager for attention.

Which is not to say that systemic racism isn’t real, or that you don’t stand a much better chance of being senselessly harassed by the police if you’re black, or that centuries of discrimination haven’t take their toll, or that representation in the media doesn’t matter, or that health-care disparities aren’t frequently predicated on race and gender—or that any of the other arguments hurled at you as soon as the conversation turns to race aren’t valid. But if you’d like to understand everything that’s so inherently nuts about the contemporary American conversation about race, it only takes this one three-word sentence: Jews are white.

You heard endless variations on this sentiment during Israel’s recent skirmish with Hamas, as a parade of lawmakers, intellectuals, and entertainers took to social media to denounce the world’s sole Jewish state of perpetrating apartheid or of murdering black and brown bodies. You hear it from radical Jewish advocates, who trill that Jews are “white passing” and therefore “functionally white,” which means they should take their place among the world’s most privileged, no matter what might’ve happened to their families between, say, 1939 and 1945. You hear it in colleges, where you can pay the equivalent of the median American salary just to attend courses with titles like “Jews and Racial Privilege.” You hear it wherever our *bien pensants* congregate to show one another their virtues and pledge allegiance to their new radical religion.

How to make sense of this?

IF YOU WERE a completist or a pedant, you could simply insist that viewing the world and its inhabitants through the lens of race is a creepy 19th-century affectation that excited mainly the most feeble-minded of Germans and led to a good bit of savagery. You could marshal Martin Luther King Jr. to your defense and say that you take the line about content of character over color of skin seriously. That kind of talk is earnest, but it won’t get you very far with those for whom race alone—and not, say, poverty, or lack of community, or a debilitating exposure to mind-rotting digital platforms—shapes every thread of the human experience.

Next, you can try and argue that the category itself—“white”—is ridiculous. Go tell Giuseppe, for example, that his granddaughter is now considered a member of the rarified white elite, even though he and his fellow immigrants were pelted with racial insults, discriminated against, and murdered. We got Columbus Day, for example, after 11 Italian Americans were lynched in 1892, leading President Harrison to instate a daylong celebration he thought would never become a tradition. Or inform Paddy that while, back in his day, the Irish were talked about, to quote one sickening periodic refrain, as “negroes turned inside out,” his grandson may now rest assured on the top of the racial-grievance food chain.

And yet, even these objections, solemn as they may be, don’t begin to capture the weight of the argument that Jews are somehow white. Take a moment to acquaint yourself, even in passing, with our stiff-necked people, and it’s the following observation that is likely to register very near the top: We stand out precisely because we don’t fit in. Is Judaism a religion? Sure. Are Jews a nation? Yes. Do we share genetic traits? Offer us dairy and find out. Do we come in all shapes, sizes, and skin colors? *Amen selah*. This is why I, a ninth-generation Israeli whose ancestors arrived in Jerusalem from the backwaters of the Austrian Empire, can amble into the Slat al-Azama synagogue in Marrakesh, or the Beth Yaakov Synagogue in Geneva, or the Ohel Leah Synagogue in Hong Kong, look around and see faces that vary wildly, and yet rest assured that when services start we will all recite, in more or less the exact same fashion, the ancient words that Jews have spoken in daily

Jews don't really fit comfortably into any of the categories that the Grand Ideologies of the ages have created to make sense of the glorious mess of human diversity.

prayer for millennia.

If this kind of image—black Jews and white Jews, European Jews and African Jews, educated wealthy Jews and barely literate poor Jews all understanding one another perfectly because they belong to the same strange family—strikes you as too flimsy, consider the criteria put forth by José Martínez Cobo, an anthropologist engaged by the United Nations to serve as special rapporteur on discrimination against indigenous populations, as to what makes a people “indigenous.”

To fit the bill, he argued, peoples and nations should display one or more of the following: occupation of ancestral lands; common ancestry; a shared culture or religion; and a shared language. By any and all metrics at our disposal—archeology, history, theology, even DNA tests—Jews, if anything, are the indigenous people of the Land of Israel, from which they might have been exiled now and then but to which they always return.

Still, to the zealots who shout that Jews are white, all that matters is the following steely argument: that for the last few decades, American Jews have benefited from the rewards that come with being among our society's most educated and best compensated few.

This is irrefutably true: About 4 in 10 Jews live in households making more than \$100,000 per year, more than any other religious group in America, an astonishing statistic when you consider that we constitute less than 2 percent of the population.

And yet this materialistic argument is rendered futile, not only by the fact that it assumes the trappings of privilege have been bestowed on all Jews. They have not; anywhere between 16 and 20 percent of Jewish American households, according to a recent survey by the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, earn less than \$30,000 a year. The argument of particular privilege is especially spurious because it ignores the unique nature of anti-Jewish bigotry, a highly resistant viral strain that feeds precisely on the difficult truth that Jews don't really fit comfortably into any of the categories that the Grand Ideologies of the ages have created to make sense of the glorious mess of human diversity.

Jews are just Jews, a difficult realization that has driven haters to distraction throughout the gen-

erations. It's why we alone have been singled out for a specific kind of steady stream of suspicion and persecution throughout history, even here in America. It's a torrent that hasn't grown any weaker, no matter how cheerful we wish to be. In 2019, for example, nearly two-thirds of all religious-based hate crimes in America targeted Jews, a 14 percent increase from the previous year...and rising.

Tragically—or comically, depending on your point of view—when members of our smart set are asked to address this surge, they find it truly and utterly baffling. For a particularly blunt and amusing example of this genre, see a recent story published by Vox, which scratched its headline while admitting that “violent anti-Semitism spiked in America during the Israel-Hamas war. And we don't know why.” This bafflement, as the writer Elad Lapidot noted in *Tablet*, is predicated precisely on our intellectuals' inability to come to terms with the simple idea that Jews are a people apart.

If you define, as the liberal ethos does, all forms of bigotry as rooted in the sin of essentialism—saying that *all* blacks, for example, possess a certain quality, or that *all* Latinos exhibit certain behaviors—you hit a brick wall when dealing with Jews. Ours, alas, is not the spirit of the Enlightenment. We're not ones for radical individuality or social contracts among free and unfettered souls who care neither a feather nor a fig for family and tribe. Ours is the communal ethos of the Hebrew Bible. It's the story of Us, not of Me, and it's possible and coherent precisely because it allows—encourages, mandates—us to display and cultivate shared traits.

Some Jews may have more melanin in their skin or fewer dollars in their bank accounts, some may dress in black and some drape themselves in the colors of the rainbow, but all belong to an extended family that stayed a family because it insisted on the display of collective behaviors.

Essentialist? You betcha.

Which leaves progressives, poor souls, in a pickle. To admit that there is something unique about Jews that does not conform to the dogmas of intersectionality and white privilege and the other semi-coherent mutterings at the core of their new and monstrous Woke Religion would be to introduce more doubt and

Young secular Jews who identify as white practice their Judaism as they do their aversion to gluten, privately and sporadically, as the mood suits them.

nuance than our secular Savonarolas can stomach. To ease their tensions, to keep their faith alive, they resort to a simple pronouncement that flattens all difference and erases all difficulty: Jews are white.

IT'S NOT TOO difficult to understand what moves the non-Jews shouting this rot. The creative genius of Jew-hatred has always been its ability to imagine the Jew as the embodiment of whatever it is that polite society finds repulsive. That's why Jews were condemned as both nefarious bankers controlling all the world's money *and* shiftily revolutionaries imperiling all capital; as both sexless creeps *and* oversexed lechers coming for the women and the girls; as both pathetically powerless *and* occultly powerful. Like something out of Harry Potter, the Jew takes the shape of whatever the Jew-hater fears and loathes most. And if you decide that there's such a thing as "whites" and that they are uniquely responsible for all evils perpetrated on the innocent and downtrodden, well, the Jews must be not only of them but nestled comfortably at the top of the white-supremacist pyramid.

Things get a bit hairier when it comes to Jews themselves repeating the "Jews are white" canard, often in the form of a mea culpa. Why do this? Why would any Jew ignore so much evidence and common sense and repeat it? If you're looking to begin and understand this madness, consider the following three misfortunes.

First, those Jews who accept the mantle of whiteness have, quite literally, lost track of time and space. Rather than humbly admit that the arc of history is long and often bends toward anti-Semitism—as is the clear pattern that emerges when you study any period of history in any corner of planet earth—they conclude quietly that because they themselves have experienced no animosity in Silver Springs or Westchester or Highland Park, that animosity has never really existed. To them, human history began in 1993, between the swearing-in of Clinton and Bjork's first LP.

This stance is perfectly aligned with a culture and a politics that praise radical individualism and personal experience over anything else. Not that personally experiencing anti-Semitism, as nearly two-thirds of Americans told pollsters they had this year, would change the picture much. Just as black intel-

lectuals who go against the simplistic narrative of race as a monolith are discounted and hounded for failing to be black in the correct and approved manner, so are Jews who share their plight dismissed as being whiners who fail to see the bigger picture of oppression and their shameful place in it. The "Jews are white" Jews, then, acquiesce, and assure themselves that nothing bad will happen here because, well, nothing bad has happened here yet *to them*.

A modicum of immersion in Jewish life would save these Jews from the maws of their own obliviousness. But herein lies their second misfortune: Religion, to them, has become not the communal pursuit of study and practice, as it had been for Jews since at least Moses, but one more lifestyle decision among many. For the most part, the modern progressive Jew is Jewish the same way she's vegan, say, or a socialist, or a fan of matcha lattes. Like nearly a third of American adults, she likely defines herself as spiritual but not religious, ignoring the fact that religion emerged in precisely the same way across cultures and continents precisely because humans realized that spiritual stirrings alone were meaningless unless tethered to the ground by rituals that had to be performed together with other people.

The young secular Jews who identify as white have none of that. As they are not likely to belong to a synagogue or a faith community, they practice their Judaism as they do their aversion to gluten, privately and sporadically, as the mood suits them. It's much easier than accepting the yoke of obligations—from holding space with other Jews you may not like to performing practices, like keeping kosher, you may not fully understand—but it also offers far less protection against being swallowed by the tide of a hostile culture.


Which brings us to misfortune number three: Being all too human, progressive Jews are eager to belong to something. And because their own parents spent decades and hundreds of thousands of dollars telling them that the greatest good is to be found in the quad of an Ivy League school or the sparkling boardroom of a *Fortune* 100 company or any of the other temples of the all-American meritocracy, they are happy to pay any price to fit in among the swells.

If you grew up in a household where Shabbat candles were rarely if ever lit and no one bothered

As some Jews continue to torment themselves by trying to fit in with a milieu that will never accept them, most young Jews are traveling in the exact opposite direction.

reading a page of Talmud, but where SAT scores were obsessed over and Penn and Princeton stickers, coffee mugs, and sweatshirts ordered as soon as those thick admission envelopes arrived in the mail, you would understandably pay any price to stay in the good graces of the priestly class that maintains these hallowed institutions. So if the priests demand that you identify as white and say a little prayer of repentance for your sins, well, isn't that a small price to pay for the American dream?

That nothing good ever came to the Jews from groveling, that we survived—indeed, thrived—precisely because we refused to compromise our beliefs, is lost on these lost souls. In their airless world, nothing

is true and nothing is permitted except for parroting the articles of faith passed down by those who hold power. Thankfully, as some Jews continue to torment themselves by trying to fit in with a milieu that will never accept them for who they are, most young Jews are traveling in the exact opposite direction. According to the latest Pew Survey, released earlier this year, only 3 percent of Jews 65 and older define themselves as observant, while among adults under 30, the number skyrockets to 17 percent. This means that many among the coming generation of American Jews have no use for obscene formulations like “Jews are white.” They have only one identity marker, the only one they ever had, the only one that matters: Jews are Jews. 

The Paradoxes of Benjamin Netanyahu

The fox who is also the hedgehog

By Bret Stephens

I ONCE GOT an unexpected, unpleasant, and altogether unforgettable phone call from Benjamin Netanyahu. This was in 2004, when Netanyahu was serving as finance minister in Ariel Sharon's government and I was editor of the *Jerusalem Post*. At the time, nobody thought of Israel as the dynamic "Start-up Nation" that it would later become, thanks largely to Netanyahu's policies. Instead, it was a country beset not just by waves of Palestinian suicide bombers but also by the stultifying legacies of the country's socialist roots: high taxes, inefficient state-owned companies, excessive welfare subsidies, a bloated public sector. From an economic standpoint, Israel was more likely to be compared to Argentina than, say, Switzerland.

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Netanyahu knew that I was one of the few editors in Israel who fully endorsed his controversial agenda of tax cuts, privatization, deregulation, and budgetary discipline. He also knew that while the *Post's* influence in Israel was limited, the paper was widely read by many of the foreign investors, policymakers, financial analysts, and *machers* of the sort he was always keen to cultivate.

But he wasn't interested in talking about his plans. Instead, he lit into me because one of the *Post's* opinion columnists had mentioned a notorious 1993 episode in which Netanyahu had gone on TV to confess an extramarital relationship while denouncing a blackmail attempt. "My children can now read English, you know!" he said, eliding the fact that his children could just as easily have learned of the affair on the Internet from sources in Hebrew.

It took me a few minutes to realize that the point of his tirade wasn't to complain about unfair or inaccu-

rate coverage. It was a rebuke for failing to provide *compliant* coverage, as if the purpose of the *Post* was to burnish his children's image of their father. Unlike most politicians, he wasn't interested in cultivating me as a friendly media voice. He wanted me as a patsy, and he wasn't subtle about letting me know it.

IN ITSELF, this long-ago encounter with the once and future prime minister didn't mean much—although Netanyahu's habit of demanding obsequious reporting would come to haunt him after he had returned to the prime minister's chair.

Yet the story helps explain the paradox of Benjamin Netanyahu, in perhaps the most paradoxical year of his long political career.

To wit, how does a man of such ambition, talent, and undeniable achievements manage so often to be so petty and self-defeating? And how can a prime minister whose recent triumphs include peace agreements with four Arab states, a series of spectacular blows to Iran's nuclear program, and a world-beating COVID-19 vaccination effort lose to the strangest coalition of political bedfellows ever assembled in Israeli—if not Western—history?

In a word, it's personal.

In 1998, during Netanyahu's turbulent first term as prime minister, his father, Benzion, gave a candid interview about his second son: "He doesn't know how to develop manners that captivate people by praise or grace," he said, adding, "He doesn't always succeed in choosing the most suitable people." About the nicest thing Benzion could say of his boy was, "He may well have been more suited as foreign minister than as head of state. But at this moment I don't see anyone better." One doesn't have to play armchair psychoanalysis to observe: some father.

In fact, Benjamin Netanyahu can also be engaging and charming, at least when he's in the public eye. But there was more than a grain of truth to the father's observations. When I first arrived in Israel as editor of the *Post*, I paid a visit to my predecessor as editor, David Bar-Illan, the pianist and polemicist who had gone to work for Netanyahu as his press spokesman before running afoul—like so many who came before and after—of Netanyahu's feared and unpopular wife, Sara. So traumatized was David by the manner in which the Netanyahus had treated him that, after suffering a crippling heart attack, he waved off Netanyahu from a sickbed visit.

Stories like this are remarkably common among those who have known Netanyahu over the years. And

they go far to explain how Netanyahu's long reign as prime minister came to an end—not because he was defeated by his ideological opponents, or brought down by a legal case against him, or turned out of office following some policy fiasco. Rather, Netanyahu fell because, through a combination of high-handedness and jealousy, he allowed too many of his onetime allies and ideological fellow-travelers to become permanently embittered ex-friends.

Naftali Bennett, the new prime minister, was a Netanyahu protégé who served as his chief of staff from 2006 to 2008 before an angry falling out. Gideon Sa'ar, the new justice minister, was brought into the Likud by Netanyahu but fell out with him once Ne-

Benjamin Netanyahu fell because he allowed too many of his allies and ideological fellow-travelers to become permanently embittered ex-friends.

tanyahu began to perceive him as a credible rival for party leadership. Benny Gantz, defense minister in the new government and the last, whom Netanyahu had appointed as IDF chief of staff, was double-crossed and politically humiliated last year after he agreed to a power-sharing deal with Netanyahu—a deal Netanyahu had no intention of honoring (and, predictably, didn't). Avigdor Lieberman, the new finance minister, was an ideological soulmate and right-hand man to Netanyahu who came to despise him after he authorized private investigations and an anonymous legal hit on his family (or so Lieberman claims).

"By my code this is a sin for which there is no forgiveness, even on Yom Kippur," Lieberman said in March. "The thought that I will sit with Netanyahu is a fantasy with no chances."

These four men command 28 Knesset seats between them. Together with one or both of the ultra-Orthodox parties, they would have easily given Netanyahu and his 30-seat Likud party a robust, right-of-center mandate in the last election—if only he could have won them over to his side. Yet when it came to the prime minister, the feud was personal. That they preferred to join forces with Yair Lapid's centrist Yesh Atid, Mansour Abbas's Islamist Ra'am, and the left-wingers of Labor and Meretz is a vivid demonstration that Netanyahu's powers of personal repulsion have exceeded those of ideological attraction. To know "King Bibi" up close and personal is to also to understand why he's king no longer.

YET IF WE are to judge Netanyahu by his faults alone, it would be impossible to account for the fact that he is the most dominant figure in Israeli politics since David Ben-Gurion. To his inveterate critics, that's merely a function of his ability to win elections, which they attribute to his being a silver-tongued fearmonger who appeals to Israel's racist side—in effect, a Donald Trump–like figure with a better brain.

The caricature sells Netanyahu and his voters short. It also fails to comprehend the scale of his achievements in his second, 12-year tenure in office. Let's list a few.

Diplomacy: The crown jewels in Netanyahu's diplomatic legacy are the Abraham Accords, which effectively represent the end of the Arab–Israeli conflict (even if subsidiary conflicts, above all with Palestinians, remain). The accords did not happen by accident. They are the result of Arab admiration for Israel's economic success; respect among Arab leaders for Netanyahu's willingness to denounce the Iran nuclear pact (and, by implication, Barack Obama) in the U.S. Congress; and some canny deal-making that involved a threat to annex much of the West Bank, which was then used as a bargaining chip for diplomatic recognition.

But the Accords are not Netanyahu's only diplomatic victories. He renewed or strengthened Israel's old ties with African countries—Uganda, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Chad, Nigeria—that are battleground states in the fight against Islamist terror. He developed strong personal

ministration has predictably reversed this policy but is unlikely to reverse course on the embassy or the Heights. This achievement, for Israel, is permanent.

Security: Despite three traumatic wars with Hamas in Gaza and the harrowing “knife intifada” of 2015, Israelis have enjoyed greater security during Netanyahu's time in office than they had in the 10 years of terror and retreat between his first and second terms. The regional picture for Israel also seems to be relatively better, at least when it comes to the Sunni Arab states. And Netanyahu never made any irreversible concessions to the Palestinians, even in the face of eight years of heavy Obama-administration pressure to do so.

The reason for the relative calm has much to do with what Israeli generals call “the war between the wars,” but which might also be described as the Netanyahu Doctrine. After being dissuaded in 2010 from a full-scale strike on Iran's nuclear facilities, Netanyahu settled for a strategy of applying low-grade but continuous military pressure on Israel's enemies in ways that seldom invite open retaliation or create international controversy. In 2019, the IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot told me, with respect to Syria, that Israel had “struck thousands of targets without claiming responsibility or asking for credit.” Jerusalem has also been instrumental in helping Cairo deal with an Islamist insurgency in Sinai, in ways that go all but unnoticed in the West but have helped solidify its security ties in the Arab world.

Then there is Iran, where Israel has conducted the

most extraordinary and long-term covert-ops campaign in modern history. The Mossad's 2018 acquisition of Iran's entire nuclear archive caused the U.S. to pull out of the Iran nuclear deal, and further attacks on nuclear installations and scientists continue to set back the Islamic Republic's nuclear timetable. When

Iran's largest naval ship sank in early June, on the same day that a major fire broke out at a large oil refinery serving Tehran, it was difficult to imagine that pure coincidence was at play.

Economy: Netanyahu was Israel's first prime minister to have a serious grasp of economics and an appreciation for business. Netanyahu also understood that there was no good reason Israel couldn't be a wealthy country—and that such wealth was a benefit to Israel's overall well-being, not a stain on its moral virtue.

When Netanyahu returned to the prime minister's office in 2009, Israel's gross domestic product (in current prices) stood at \$207 billion. Ten years later, just before the pandemic, it had nearly doubled in size, to about \$400 billion. By comparison, the U.K. econo-

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bonds with Narendra Modi of India and Shinzo Abe of Japan. He maintained a functional relationship with Vladimir Putin, which is a vital Israeli interest whatever one thinks of the Russian dictator. He forged strategic ties with Greece, historically one of the more anti-Israel countries in Europe.

And, of course, he cultivated Trump. Many American Jews consider this a scandal, as if Netanyahu would have done better by sneering at the American president in the manner of, say, Canada's Justin Trudeau. But the payoff for Israelis of Netanyahu's courtship of the 45th president was spectacular: an American Embassy in Jerusalem, U.S. recognition of Israeli sovereignty on the Golan Heights, a severe downgrading of U.S. relations with the Palestinian leadership. The Biden ad-

my grew by just 17 percent over the same time period. The average monthly wage in Israel is now nearly 50 percent higher than it was in 2009. Israel is no longer the country where, as the old saying had it, you could make a small fortune if you arrived with a large one.

As in any country, there are arguments to be made about the nature of wealth inequality and distribution, not least along class, ethnic, and religious lines. What should be inarguable is that wealth gives Israel strategic advantages it didn't previously enjoy. As one *New York Times* writer recently pointed out, 40 years ago, U.S. aid to Israel amounted to 10 percent of its economy, while today, at nearly \$4 billion a year, it's closer to 1 percent. Wealth diminishes dependency. It also makes Israel a more attractive destination to Jews who no longer feel entirely secure in their diasporic homes, or who may simply be seeking opportunity.

Palestinians: Most of Netanyahu's predecessors as prime minister had gotten the Palestinian issue wrong—some by imagining that Palestinians didn't, or shouldn't, exist as a separate people; others by believing they were the most important, if not the only, thing that mattered. Both approaches had proved disastrous.

Netanyahu understood that Israel can neither separate politically from the Palestinians safely nor coexist with them indefinitely. The right approach was one of long-term tactical management, not grandiose peace plans and "final-status" solutions.

Undergirding that view is the belief that time is, in fact, on Israel's side, for at least three reasons. First, the demographic picture is hardly as bleak for Jews as is often suggested (an idea that has ample empirical basis, at least if Israeli Jews maintain their robust birth rate while Arab birth rates continue to decline). The Cassandras of the left have been warning for decades of a ticking demographic time bomb, but, much like the notorious clock of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, the hands never seem to reach midnight.

Second, the ideological picture also isn't as dire for Israel as widely believed—squeamish liberals, campus BDS campaigns, and rising anti-Semitism in Europe and the U.S. notwithstanding—because much of the world is moving in a more nationalist direction. That gives Israel new friends in the world, whether they are evangelical Christians in the U.S. or Hindu nationalists in India (as well as some unsavory figures like Hungary's Viktor Orban). The abiding threat of Islamism also helps Israel, insofar as Israel is broadly seen, and widely admired, for its success in fighting it.

Finally, Arab states are growing tired of the Palestinian cause, at least in its maximalist versions, and are prepared to put the issue on ice in pursuit of the goals they share with the Jewish state. The fact that one barely heard a peep of protest from Cairo, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, or other Arab capitals during the last round of fighting in Gaza suggests there is much to that belief.

LITTLE OF THIS goes noticed outside of Israel, thanks mainly to shoddy media coverage, monomaniacal obsession with Palestinian grievances, and what can only be described as a kind of Bibi Derangement Syndrome among his critics, many

Netanyahu clearly understood that Israel can neither separate politically from the Palestinians safely nor coexist with them indefinitely.

of them left-leaning American Jews. (Some of these critics are fond of insisting that their problems with Israel are all about their disdain for Netanyahu. Don't hold your breath waiting for them to moderate their views under the new coalition.)

Yet Netanyahu lasted as long as he did in his job because he was, in many ways, very good at it. After the utopian follies of the peace processers in the 1990s, the trauma of the second intifada at the start of the century, and Ehud Olmert's incompetent handling of the 2006 Lebanon War, it's easy to see the appeal (as one of his campaign ads had it) of the "Bibisitter"—the safe pair of hands who'll make sure the kids sleep well at night.

But, again, this isn't quite the whole story.

The usual rap on Netanyahu is that he's a remorseless ideologue whose only goal is "Greater Israel" and who will do whatever it takes to get it, whether it's through sly prevarication or open demagoguery. An alternative view, most often held by Netanyahu's conservative critics, is that he either lacks the courage of his convictions, or just believes in little beyond himself.

"How is he better than Rabin or Peres?" the former Likud Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir railed against Netanyahu after Israel withdrew from parts of the West Bank after the 1998 Wye River agreement during Bibi's first go as prime minister. "He has a desire for power for its own sake." Several years later, as a member of Ariel Sharon's government, Netanyahu claimed to oppose Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, but kept voting in favor of its implementation. "After supporting disengagement four times" in

cabinet and Knesset votes, Sharon said of his finance minister, “Bibi ran away.” Naftali Bennett’s own break with Netanyahu became definite after the latter’s 2009 speech at Bar-Ilan University, in which he accepted the principle of a Palestinian state.

“We go along with this vision that is impractical, and then, we are surprised why the world is angry with us for not fulfilling that vision,” Bennett told me in a 2015 interview. “You can’t say ‘I support a Palestinian state’ and then not execute according to that. I think people appreciate honesty.”

That last point strikes me as unfair: It’s perfectly consistent to accept the idea of a Palestinian state in principle—the principle being that it should model itself on Costa Rica or the U.A.E.—while rejecting it in practice—the current reality being that it has more in common with Lebanon or Yemen as an unstable terrorist entrepot that has no interest in meeting even minimal Israeli demands for peace and security. Asking the lion to lie down with the lamb is a beautiful wish and a terrible policy.

But the deeper criticism is that Netanyahu’s tenure amounts to little more than a holding action, a bravura performance in kicking cans down the road.

When I interviewed Netanyahu in 2009, just as he was about to return to office and Operation Cast Lead was winding down, he was quick to criticize the outcome. “Notwithstanding the blows to Hamas, it’s still in Gaza, it’s still ruling Gaza,” he said. Netanyahu’s “opti-

firmly ensconced in power in Damascus while Hezbollah maintains its firm grip in Lebanon.

In these respects, the strategic picture has not decisively changed on Netanyahu’s watch, and Prime Minister Bennett will face almost exactly the same unenviable choices Netanyahu did in the early days of his tenure. There are circumstances in which buying time amounts to a form of progress, but history hasn’t yet provided a verdict as to whether this was one of them.

There have also been hidden costs to this style of leadership. The essence of good policy—containment comes to mind—is that it establishes conditions in which less-than-superb leaders can be entrusted with its execution. Under Netanyahu, by contrast, the man and the policy effectively became one and the same. “Bibi-ism” isn’t really a set of principles or concepts that his successors can apply or adapt. It’s the view that one man, and one man only, has the wisdom, experience, and instincts to run the country.

The result has been an extraordinary personalization of Israeli politics. At least a quarter of Israelis—starting with Netanyahu himself—seem to believe that *après Bibi, le déluge*. That has encouraged Netanyahu and his allies to vilify their political opponents in ways that are both hysterical and potentially dangerous. Early in June, Likud lawmaker May Golan compared Bennett and Sa’ar to “suicide bombers,” while Aryeh Deri, leader of the Shas party, warned that Bennett would “destroy Shabbat.”

Netanyahu’s political opponents, by contrast, have come to believe that Bibi is “*le déluge*” and have been intent to do just about anything to destroy him. Among the many paradoxes of the last few years of Israeli politics is that the legal cases that

Under Netanyahu, the man and the policy effectively became one and the same. ‘Bibi-ism’ isn’t really a set of principles or concepts that his successors can adapt.

mal outcome,” he claimed, would be regime change for the Strip, but “the minimal outcome would have been to seal Gaza” from being able to acquire lethal munitions. Yet 12 years and three wars later, not much has changed, except that Hamas has gained greater international legitimacy while Israelis have grown used to spending time in their safe rooms periodically.

Something similar might be said of Netanyahu’s approach to Tehran. Dazzling as Israel’s intelligence and diplomatic coups have been, Iran is now enriching uranium to unprecedented levels of purity even as the Biden administration maneuvers to re-enter the nuclear deal. That goes also in the north, where thousands of Israeli air strikes have blunted Iran’s power without altering the fact that Bashar al-Assad remains

have been ginned up against the prime minister (and which, at least by my reading, mainly suggest aggressive or sleazy political behavior, not criminal offenses) did more to encourage him to cling to his office by nearly any means necessary than they did to give him an opportunity for a graceful exit.

That’s what happens when the essence of one’s political program is to stay in power as long as possible, whether out of a belief in one’s own indispensability or a need for legal self-preservation (or, in Netanyahu’s case, both). Democracies do best when parties stand for ideas, not personalities, and when political opponents aren’t viewed as mortal enemies. They also do better when leaders observe some moral boundaries, like not bidding for the support of the

Kahanist party or not seeking a pardon for a soldier who murdered a Palestinian terrorist after he'd been neutralized. But that wasn't Bibi's way.

IN HIS OFTEN cited (if seldom read) essay "The Hedgehog and the Fox," Isaiah Berlin begins with the ancient distinction between the fox, which "knows many things," and the hedgehog, "which knows one big thing." At the *Jerusalem Post*, a colleague once made the point to me, during the 2002 Likud leadership contest between Ariel Sharon and Netanyahu, that the former was the hedgehog while the latter was the fox. It was another way of saying that Bibi was clever but Arik was wise. In that race, the hedgehog won.

This is one way of looking at Netanyahu. To nearly all of his bitter critics, on either side of the ideological spectrum, he is nothing but an arch-maneuverer, although they don't all agree on what he is maneuvering toward.

The left sees him as a dedicated ideologue who occasionally feigns pragmatism. For the right, it's the opposite: He's a self-serving pragmatist who pretends to have an ideology. In a public career spanning nearly 40 years, it's easy to find evidence for both views. The Bar-Ilan speech that so offended Naftali Bennett is supposed to prove the first; the unwillingness to retake Gaza supposedly demonstrates the second.

Yet the point of Berlin's essay tends to be missed. In real life, as opposed to parable or literary criticism, there are at least a few people who are *both* hedgehog and fox, men who "looked for a harmonious universe, but everywhere found war and disorder." Berlin's great example of this type was Leo Tolstoy, whose "sense of reality was until the end too devastating to be compatible with any moral ideal which he was able to construct out of the fragments into which his intellect shivered in the world."

Netanyahu is hardly Tolstoy. Still, he's a man of formidable ambition and talent who entered the political fray looking for the harmonious universe in which a Jewish state—recognized, whole, and secure—could take its rightful place among the nations. What he found instead was that there was no straight way to get there, and perhaps no way at all, given the implacability of many of its enemies and the faithlessness of some of its friends. The two great "solutions" are

equally false. There is no plausible Palestinian state that can satisfy Israeli security requirements and Palestinian desires. There is also no map of Israel that can simply swallow the Palestinians without risking being swallowed by them in turn.

What there is, then, is a muddled reality that must deeply disappoint idealists of every stripe. But it's also a reality that beats every conceivable alternative. Netanyahu understands this, even if it's not something he would say out loud. The criticism that he does nothing but kick cans down the road ignores the fact that, when it comes to Israel's major strategic challenges, at least for now, that's the only thing an Israeli

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prime minister can do. The question is how far the can gets kicked, and how much power and flexibility Israel can gain—militarily, economically, demographically, and so on—before it needs to kick it again. As Michael Oren, the historian and former Israeli ambassador to the U.S., has pointed out to me, Israel's entire history is one long "war of attrition" or "war between the wars." Still, it's a war that Israel can fight for the long term while its people continue to flourish.

The paradox of Benjamin Netanyahu is that a man who rose to power on the strength of a certain vision of Israel held on to power at the expense of that vision. It's that a man who did much to strengthen Israel's position in the world through the bullishness of his personality also did much to damage to Israel's politics through the same bullishness. It's that a man whose thoughts, ambitions, and actions always seemed to have the broadest sweep could become the agent of his own political undoing thanks to a succession of small grievances and petty power plays.

There's no reason to search for definitive answers anytime soon. The coalition that succeeds Netanyahu is fractious and thin, held together by little more than its loathing for a singular man. Nobody knows this better than Netanyahu himself, which is why the thought that must surely run through his head, rightly, is, "I'll be back." 📌

The Jews Who Are Complicit in Jew-Hatred

It's a feature, not a bug, of the horrors of the past month

By Seth Mandel

WHEN the *New York Times* finally reported on the plague of nationwide street violence against Jews in the spring of 2021, more than a week after the attacks began in the wake of Hamas using rockets to strike Israel, the tone it took was less one of outrage than of bewilderment. “Until the latest surge,” read a May 26 story, “anti-Semitic violence in recent years was largely considered a right-wing phenomenon, driven by a white supremacist movement emboldened by rhetoric from former President Donald J. Trump, who often trafficked in stereotypes.” This was nonsense: The most common street violence against Jews took place in New York and New Jersey, and it had nothing at all to do with Trump or “right-wing” politics. Par for the course for the Gray Lady, perhaps, but far more concerning was *where* the reporters seemed to be getting the misinformation. “This is why Jews feel so terrified in this moment,” Anti-Defamation League CEO Jonathan Greenblatt told the paper. “For four years it seemed to be stimulated from the political right, with devastating consequences.” At the scenes of Jew-hunting that began in May, during the war between Israel and Hamas, Greenblatt lamented,

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“No one is wearing MAGA hats.”

If there's one organization whose responsibility it is to prepare not just the Jewish community but the wider United States public and its government for emerging anti-Semitic threats, it's the ADL. Instead, the head of the ADL has been spreading a cynical left-wing myth about anti-Semitism while threats to the Jewish community fester.

And it's even worse than it looks, because while there's long been a willful blindness toward anti-Semitism from the left, the ADL and other partisan groups aren't the ones experiencing this blindness. They're the blinders.

THE ADL TRACKS various kinds of anti-Israel extremism when Israel is at war. It issued a list during the latest flare-up with Hamas on May 20 titled “Prominent Voices Demonize Israel Regarding the Conflict.” Demonizing rhetoric, the ADL warned, can “enable an environment whereby hateful actions against Jews and supporters of Israel are accepted more freely, and where anti-Jewish tropes may be normalized.” One category the list featured was of those “Accusing Israel of ‘Attacking al-Aqsa,’” a hoary libel falsely claiming that Jews want to destroy the central Mosque in Jerusalem. It has been used to incite anti-Jewish riots for a century. What was notable here was one name missing from the list, and arguably the worst offender.

On May 12, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-

Cortez had castigated President Joe Biden on Twitter for expressing Israel's right to defend itself while noting what supposedly was to blame for the violence: "the expulsions of Palestinians and the attacks on Al Aqsa." Her name and her statement were missing from the ADL's list of slanders and slanderers. The *Jerusalem Post's* Lahav Harkov asked Greenblatt why.

He answered: "We've been speaking out pretty regularly, calling out individuals and examples of these crazed—the things I'm talking about right now."

"Any members of Congress, lately?" Harkov responded.

"I'll have to go back and look," Greenblatt said.

He didn't have to go back and look. It's likely that the omission was at his explicit direction. He came to the ADL after serving in the Obama administration. His fellow ex-Obama official, Halie Soifer, who served as a national-security adviser to Kamala Harris before she became vice president, took over the flagship Democratic Jewish organization, the Jewish Democratic Council of America. The JDCA's executive committee is loaded up with current or former presidents and executives of such mainstream Jewish groups as AIPAC, the Jewish Federations, and the American-Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. After pressure built to respond to AOC's tweet and the others like it, Soifer wrote: "Proud to be a Democrat in this moment when leaders recognize there is no binary choice to be made between Israel's security & right to self-defense, and Palestinian rights & safety. We can do both at the same time, while rejecting the forced false dichotomy & narrative of divide." Thus did Soifer give a seal of approval to the effort to dress up hateful anti-Zionism as merely legitimate criticism of Israel's government.

As Harkov noted, "the ADL's voice hasn't been heard on some of these members of Congress who have been calling Israel an apartheid state, who have claimed that Israel has raided al Aqsa, who have also said that Israel is killing too many children, implying that it's intentional." Indeed, Ocasio-Cortez's tweet was just the opening salvo. A day later, on May 13, came a chilling session of the House of Representatives, with dark echoes of Jewish history.

Several Democratic members of the House took turns standing next to blown-up photos of bloodied Palestinian children and gave fiery speeches denouncing Zionist perfidy—the sorts of words and charges that, since the age of the czars, have been followed by the spilling of Jewish blood. This time was no different, except it wasn't a Russian backwater or a Munich beer hall. It was on the floor of the United States Congress.

One by one, these members of Congress, Democrats all, sought to make the Jewish state the stand-in

for "systems of oppression here in the United States and globally," as Representative Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts put it. Everyone in the world, according to these diatribes, had something to fear from Jerusalem. Ocasio-Cortez, whose family is from Puerto Rico, talked about the U.S. naval exercises held on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques for decades until the Navy left in 2003. The Navy stands accused of testing bombs and other weapons using napalm, depleted uranium, and Agent Orange, sickening the local population. Ocasio-Cortez offered a bizarre conspiratorial accusation: "When I saw those [Israeli] airstrikes that are supported with U.S. funds, I could not help but wonder if our communities were practice for this."

Pressley equated crowd dispersal conducted by Israeli police at a riot on the Temple Mount to "students protesting to end poverty and oppression in the streets of Bogota [being] shot dead," white supremacists storming the U.S. Capitol, and "police brutality and state-sanctioned violence" against black Americans.

Missouri Representative Cori Bush made a point of referring to the holy city as "Jerusalem, Palestine," and suggested that the U.S. was following an Israeli playbook when it "brutalized" black protesters.

Minnesota Representative Ilhan Omar, who has in the past accused American Jews of disloyalty and shared anti-Semitic content on social media, insisted that the source of the conflict was Jewish settlers uprooting Palestinian Arabs and taking nearly all their land—in 1948, in the "Nakba."

Rashida Tlaib, the Michigan-born congresswoman of Palestinian descent who has also relentlessly targeted Jews during her few years in the House, spoke that day, but she had laid the groundwork for it at an anti-Israel protest two days earlier. "What they are doing to the Palestinians is what they are doing to our black brothers and sisters here," Tlaib told the crowd May 11. As she left the stage, the crowd chanted, "Long live Palestine, down down Israel."

In the days and weeks that followed, even after an Israel– Hamas cease-fire was in place, Jews in America were physically attacked with abandon—diners at restaurants in Los Angeles and Manhattan, Jews on the streets of New York, families in Florida attending synagogue services. The ADL saw a 75 percent uptick in reported incidents. In one typical attack, a group of men reportedly drove around Brooklyn assaulting Jews in the open while yelling, "Free Palestine!"

When called out for their silence, progressive Democratic lawmakers condemned "anti-Semitism and Islamophobia" as one, knowing that their audience would interpret any specific denunciation of anti-Semitism as a statement in support of Israel. That's what

happened at Rutgers University, the school with the largest Jewish undergraduate population in the country. Its provost and chancellor put out a statement decrying anti-Semitism and then were bullied into apologizing for it by a pro-Palestinian group on campus that claimed the statement was insensitive to Palestinians.

Throughout this whole affair, not a single congressional Democrat would criticize any of his colleagues by name. That includes Chuck Schumer, now the Senate majority leader (whose former top aide is also on the executive committee of the National Jewish Democratic Council), who couldn't be roused from his cowardly torpor even when explosive devices were thrown at Jews in his own city.

The closest anyone came was Representative Josh Gottheimer of New Jersey. He and three other Jewish Democrats wrote a public letter to their leadership referencing the types of hateful comments made by their progressive colleagues—without naming them—in an attempt to get support from Democratic Party leadership. The bid failed. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi stuck with the purveyors of anti-Semitism in her caucus and threw the Jewish Democrats under the bus. Neither the ADL nor the JDCA uttered a peep.

As usual, one exceptional voice in all this was that of the American Jewish Committee, whose young leadership director, Seffi Kogen, noted in *Newsweek* that “while anti-Zionist gangs beat up Jews in her city, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was providing a quasi-intellectual basis for their actions.” But for a large part of the organized Jewish community, the outburst of violence was met with inexcusable surprise.

As I wrote in these pages in March 2020, after watching mainstream Jewish organizations and political figures bash President Donald Trump's peace proposal because they deemed it too biased in favor of Israel's security: “What's happening here is more than a skirmish over a peace plan, or a distressing glimpse into the way American Jewry's leaders privilege their partisan leanings over the fact that their leadership roles in American society are due to their Judaism and not their Democratic Party membership. What we are seeing is the way American Jewish leaders fail to take seriously the rising tide of anti-Semitism that masquerades as ‘anti-Zionism’—and even the way progressive groups enable it.”*

Ocasio-Cortez and Tlaib, I explained, elevated leftist Jewish groups such as IfNotNow to new prominence by using them to shield the Squad from accusations of anti-Semitism. With their endorsements, in turn, IfNotNow and the New Israel Fund launched a frontal assault on the Jewish Federations because the latter wouldn't accept a donation earmarked for IfNot-

Now. The Jewish establishment was trying to hold the line on support for the Jewish state even as progressive politicians were helping foment a rebellion against these very basic Jewish values. The Squad entered a similar alliance with Jewish Voice for Peace, which had pushed one of the anti-Zionist conspiracy theories that reportedly motivated the perpetrators of the 2019 shooting at a Jewish shop in Jersey City.

Nothing has changed. In May 2021, IfNotNow used the occasion of the outbreak of anti-Jewish street violence to launch an invitation to a seminar on “Zionism and Apartheid.” Jewish Democrats in Congress who made general statements against anti-Semitism were accused by Jewish Voice for Peace of “using anti-Semitism as a political weapon to shield the Israeli government from accountability.”

Last year, Sean Cooper of *Tablet* exposed how the Jewish organization Bend the Arc deliberately turned the group's work away from the Jewish community and toward various liberal and Democratic Party causes, shaping the activism of its member synagogues along the way. Rabbi David Saperstein, who for years led the Reform movement's political arm, was listed as a Bend the Arc board member and served as President Obama's religious-freedom ambassador. During the recent spate of violence, Bend the Arc's political arm took the time to oppose police protection at synagogues on racial grounds, while also blaming the increase in anti-Semitism during the conflict on “white nationalists.”

Perhaps the most consequential of the progressive left's alliances has been with Bernie Sanders, the senator from Vermont and former presidential candidate who arguably has achieved more political success and visibility than any American Jewish politician other than near-miss vice-presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman. Sanders is a mentor and trailblazer for young progressives in Congress, and he made a point of putting the Squad and other anti-Israel activists in visible roles on his 2020 presidential campaign. His moves have scrambled the Jewish community's response to Sanders's politics and those of his protégés. That is a feature, not a bug, of this alliance, as far as Sanders and the Squad see it.

“What does it look like when a national Jewish community understands what's at stake?” I asked here last year. My answer then was the united front the UK Jewish community put up to oppose Jeremy Corbyn, the since-deposed Labour leader who had turned his party into a thoroughly anti-Semitic organization that harassed the Jews in its ranks and incited London's streets against its Jewish community. Nearly nine of out ten UK

* “The Rot Inside American Jewish Organizations,” March 2020

Jews agreed that Corbyn was an anti-Semite, and before the election that finally sealed Corbyn's doom, the country's chief rabbi was moved to speak out against him.

Sanders and Corbyn were mutual admirers. Ocasio-Cortez backed Corbyn in his election. The warnings that Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez were openly modeling the future of their party on Corbyn's Labour went ignored or dismissed. The events of May have made the Democratic Party's Corbynization indisputable.

Events in early June then gave the dwindling band of Democratic anti-Corbynistas one more bite at the apple. On June 7, Omar tweeted a summary of a question she had for Secretary of State Antony Blinken: "We must have the same level of accountability and justice for all victims of crimes against humanity. We have seen unthinkable atrocities committed by the U.S., Hamas, Israel, Afghanistan, and the Taliban. I asked @SecBlinken where people are supposed to go for justice."

The comparison of the U.S. and Israel to Hamas and the Taliban seemed a typically gratuitous demonstration of Omar's untouchable status. Twelve Jewish Democrats wrote a letter finally naming her while refraining from calling her an anti-Semite.

The response to the letter revealed the depressing reality at the core of American Jewish life: the complete abandonment of the Jews by their own supposed watchdogs and the merger of those groups into semiofficial arms of the very political party now enabling their torment. Greenblatt merely retweeted one of the signatories' tweets of the letter, adding his own comment: "Well said." His me-tooing of the statement added insult to injury: Not only were the congressmen given no cover by the ADL, but once they ventured into the breach they were given no reinforcement by it. The following morning, the JDCA tweeted: "Jewish Dems will be meeting with Rep. Omar during our Week of Action to discuss her recent comments on Israel, as well as other priorities of Jewish Dems in Minnesota. There is no equivalence between Israel and terrorist organizations such as Hamas." The organization sounded more annoyed at having to say something than outraged by what Omar had said.

The final blow came from Pelosi, who told CNN days later: "We did not rebuke her. We thanked—acknowledged that she made a clarification... Congresswoman Omar is a valued member of our caucus."

What happened in between the release of the letter and Pelosi's public declaration of Omar's righteousness was instructive: The Squad went nuclear. Ocasio-Cortez accused her Jewish colleagues of "targeting" Omar and putting her in "danger." Cori Bush said her Jewish colleagues were motivated by "anti-Blackness and Islamophobia." Jamaal Bowman, who

ousted the pro-Israel stalwart Eliot Engel in a 2020 primary and who represents a New York district with a large Jewish contingent, likewise suggested that the complaints from his colleagues were due to Omar's being a Muslim black woman. Omar herself complained of the "constant harassment and silencing" by her Jewish colleagues and the "Islamophobic tropes" they supposedly used.

It was an astonishingly vile and aggressive coordinated attack against the Jewish group. The ADL was silent. JDCA was silent. The Democratic Party sided with the Squad. The Jewish community had been abandoned to the rise of the dominant left-of-center ideology according to which Jews are part of a white power structure of which Israel is a prime example.

Corbyn's attempt to separate the Jews from the Jewish state in the UK failed miserably. But the Squad's efforts to do the same here are not failing. And it's not just in the halls of Congress. The *New Yorker's* Helen Rosner suggested it would be a good tactic not to beat up Jews, as part of an overall strategy to undermine Israel's legitimacy. (This after the *New Yorker's* union put out a statement of solidarity with the Palestinians that included the phrase "from the river to the sea.") Michelle Goldberg of the *New York Times* wrote a column with a headline so instantly infamous that the *Times* eventually and quietly changed it: "Attacks on Jews Over Israel Are a Gift to the Right."

Meanwhile, the comedian Sarah Silverman objected to attacks on Jews in Los Angeles not on the grounds that they were evil acts of anti-Semitic violence but rather because "WE ARE NOT ISRAEL." For his part, Kenneth Roth, the obsessively anti-Israel executive director of Human Rights Watch, declared, "It is WRONG to equate the Jewish people with the apartheid and deadly bombardment of Prime Minister Netanyahu's government."

Throwing fellow Jews to the wolves is abominable moral behavior. Delicately excising the name and words of a chic Democratic politician from a list of anti-Semitic statements to protect her—or to protect the organization you run from her wrath—constitutes an act of complicity in the violence that ensued in whatever small measure from her remarks. And the man who was thus complicit—Jonathan Greenblatt—had the nerve to act surprised. The anti-Semitic street violence in America is "literally happening from coast to coast, and spreading like wildfire," Greenblatt told the *Times*. "The sheer audacity of these attacks feels very different."

It feels different because it feels so familiar. And if the American Jewish community is to survive, it must start acting like it. And we must start by cleaning our own corrupted house. 🇺🇸

An American Trapped in an Englishman's Body

A memoir of a Jewish boyhood in Liverpool

By Roger Bennett

ONE OF THE earliest beliefs I still cling to in life is that I was born an American trapped in an Englishman's body. That is the kind of story you manufacture about yourself when you grow up in a place like Liverpool in the 1980s.

Back then, the city was apocalyptic. A rotting, dilapidated carcass in grim decline. When I first watched *Mad Max*, I thought the wasteland Mel Gibson braved

appeared like an upgrade in comparison. When you live somewhere like Liverpool, you ask yourself a simple, yet powerful question on an almost daily basis: How on earth did I land here?

There are fewer than 3,000 Jews in Liverpool. A gaggle of doctors, accountants, and lawyers with the occasional dentist thrown into the mix for variety. Every family has some variation of a similar explanation to the above question. The tale generally begins with a great-grandparent fleeing whatever inhospitable, frigid, rotting-potato-stenched Eastern European shtetl they had tried to pass off as home, hotfooting it onto the steerage level of an ocean liner. Chased right up to the gangplank, in almost every telling, by a rabid band of Cossacks with murder on their mind. When that vessel stopped briefly to refuel along the way, their ancestors had been among the simpler-minded, dimmer ones who glimpsed the one tall building on the Liverpool skyline and believed they were staring right at New York City, their intended destination. Fatally mistaken,

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they disembarked and were left to eke out pennies in the English North West, rather than undoubtedly make their fortunes in that promised land filled with bounty and possibility, the United States of America.

The myth was certainly true for my family. My great-grandfather was a kosher butcher from Berdychiv, a textile town in northern Ukraine. His escape plan was rational: to flee to Chicago, Illinois. A city that made sense for a meat man, as it was the self-professed “Hog Capital of the World.” Liverpool—not so much. A paucity of clients made it hard to earn a living as a kosher-meat wholesaler. Improvisation was necessary, which ultimately meant also servicing the need for halal beef among the growing Muslim population scattered across the gloomy declining mill towns of the north of England.

Back then, Liverpool was a place large on lore, low on quality of life. In the high-rolling days of the British Empire, it had indeed been one of the world’s great port cities. In the 18th century the waterfront became a hub of the slave trade, as Liverpool-based vessels stole one and a half million Africans across the Atlantic in unimaginably cruel conditions, while the textiles, coal, guns, and steel once produced in vast quantities across the industrial north were dispatched in the opposite direction to pay for them. The banks of the River Mersey became weighed down by warehouses, commercial power, and mercantile wealth. Yet the Second World War laid waste to Britain’s industrial might, and the establishment of Europe instead of the United States as our primary trading partner stripped Liverpool of its geographical *raison d’être* almost overnight. The docks fell silent. The city spiraled into decline, beset by the degrading forces of unemployment, poverty, and crime, like a British Baltimore without the steamed crabs upside.

Thanks largely to the vicarious prestige cast on the city by the Beatles and its two powerhouse football teams, Liverpool remained well known around the globe despite the general decay of the surroundings, a reality accentuated by the fact that few towns boast more raconteurs, romantics, and deluded self-aggrandizers per square mile. To this day Liverpool remains defiantly proud, a city often quite literally drunk on its own sense of self. Yet no amount of romantic truth-stretching could bring back the hemorrhaging jobs or quell the sense that when you stood still on a street corner, you could witness the industrial carcass of a town actually rotting away before your eyes.

It was amid this sodden wasteland of a city with

its moldy terraced housing, drab chip shops, and cheap booze houses that a handful of Jews had accidentally marooned themselves. A land with a low-grade fear hanging over it. A place as dispiriting as the sunless sky and the all-pervasive dampness you could not shake no matter how many layers of clothing you put on. Certainly, the most infertile ground to sow escape-fueled romantic dreams of freedom, acceptance, and success.

There is perhaps no greater sign that we were still a family in search of acceptance than my parents anointing us children with the least Jewish names possible.

The Jews stayed put because they were exhausted and relieved and, after escaping the Russian bloodlands, had pretty low standards. Any place offering more than immediate death and destruction was an upgrade. And because adaptation is in the DNA of the Jewish people, they always attempt to make sense of the world around them.

I often wondered what early encounters between these bewildered Yiddish speakers and local Liverpoolians must have been like. One group with their spigot of broken Yiddish-inflected English, sounding like a constant moaning complaint; the other, snorting words angrily out of their nasal passages in local dialect called “Scouse” that’s so baffling, it’s as if the sentences have somehow been recorded and then replayed backward. One way or another, the new arrivals worked out how to raise their synagogues, open their delis, and break ground on their cemeteries, striking out to pursue the best Britain could offer its accidental citizens—the security of grinding their way to middle-class comfort.

That vaunted middle-class status had been attained by the time I came into the world at Broadgreen Hospital in 1970. My older brother, Nigel, was already two years old. I was given the birth name Roger. There is perhaps no greater sign that we were still a family in search of acceptance than my parents anointing us with the least Jewish names possible. Their unspoken hope was to help us fit in by choosing what they perceived to be the English-est, most Christian identities. Yet they were either too eager, oblivious, or willing to overlook that my name was also a synonym for anal sex (as in “Sir Roderick Wigbert Stourton loved to roger his butler”), and perhaps for that reason had long faded out of fashion by the time I was of schooling age. Thus, I was always the only, lonely Roger in a classroom sea of Waynes, Garys, and Jeremys, or as

Liverpudlian naming conventions dictated, “Wazzas,” “Gazzas,” and “Jezzas.”

Alas, my name was the least of my challenges. As a Liverpudlian middle-class Jew, I was already an outsider in a working-class, heavily Catholic city that did not cope well with even a whiff of the other. For the first 10 years of my life, my best friend was my grandfather Samuel Polak, who lived right across the road from us with my grandmother Rita in the house they had raised my mum in. Almost every night, I would run over the moment I finished my schoolwork, and spend the evening being doted on in a house that perpetually smelled of chicken soup, honey cake, and the peculiar odor emitted by heavy velvet curtains.

My grandfather continued the family meat line, but grudgingly. I learned not to blame him after accepting an invitation to experience his job for a day. At the abattoir where he plied his trade, I watched him wander into a pen of defeated cattle and insert his fist into one unfortunate cow’s anus after another. My grandfather’s arm would thrust deep into the animal, disappearing right up to the armpit, a feat that somehow empowered him to assess the ultimate quality of the meat. With a grimace, he would slowly retrieve his limb, and murmur “Good anus” or sometimes “bad cow, that” to a silent, melancholy note-taking assistant before moving on to the next. My grandfather was an intellectually curious, quiet, dapper man. The whole ordeal seemed to make him suffer more than it did the cows.

The instant the topic turned to America, my grandfather would sit back, cigarette in hand, and the tales flowed as if he had entered a fever dream.

At home, with slippers on, reclining on a throne-like mahogany and leather couch in his living room, my grandfather was altogether more content. We would play game after game of chess. Evenly matched, the two of us were a great pair. I was hungry for company. He was eager to talk about the things that really interested him. With a pot of tea and an endless supply of chocolate-covered digestives to dunk into our cups between us, we would engage in serious man talk about the important things in life: war movies, history books, and Everton Football Club. My nightly goal was to relax my grandfather sufficiently so I could coax him into telling me the stories of his life as an infantryman during the war. Startling tales about shooting at, or being shot at, by Germans, whom he referred to as

“Jerries,” during the Siege of El Alamein, an experience he generally preferred to keep to himself.

But by far his favorite topic of conversation was the United States of America. Or rather, recounting random memories born of his frequent pilgrimages to the American shores. This was the destination my grandfather had repeatedly traveled to for vacations since the 1950s, an intrepid decision back in an era when British vacationers rarely ventured far from home. The way he described it, he had felt compelled to journey to those gold-paved streets his father had once dreamed of moving to, like a sockeye salmon programmed by nature to swim upstream and spawn.

These adventures started way before transatlantic flight was a regular facet of travel life. Alongside the couch, on a small matching side table on which he placed his most vital lounging items—a packet of Senior Service cigarettes, a family-sized slab of Cadbury’s Fruit & Nut chocolate, and a brick-sized, primitive television remote control—was a black-and-white photograph of him bound for New York City, standing proudly beside a plucky propeller plane, refueling in some remote snow-filled airfield in Goose Bay, Labrador, or Gander, Newfoundland, clad in the same trilby hat and three-piece suit he wore to the slaughterhouse.

The instant the topic turned to America, the chess game was forgotten. My grandfather would sit back, cigarette in hand, and the tales flowed as if he had entered a fever dream. Fragments of memory from expeditions

to Florida, New York, California, and all points in between would tumble out of his mouth. “Did you know in Vegas, they serve you breakfast *while* you play the slot machines?” he would say with an undiminished sense of astonishment. Or “In Times Square, there are diners where

they refill your coffee cups the second you have finished them.” Or “Miami is a land *filled* with Jews, and the restaurants grill steaks that are bigger than the plate that carries them.” There were stories of plenty, of service, of perceived luxury and wonder from a land that still seemed as magical, distant, and exotic to me from the perspective of 1970s Liverpool as it had to my Cossack-fleeing ancestors at the turn of the century.

Indeed, as he spoke, many of those relatives would stare down at us from their vantage point in heavy-framed sepia-tinged photographs on the walls around the room: Formal turn-of-the-century portraits of sickly-looking groups gazing austerely at a Ukrainian photographer, or headshots of terrified-looking uniformed teenage boys who had been forcibly

conscripted into the Russian army. Scattered between these heirlooms, though, was an arsenal of tourist trinkets. Once his stories had picked up a sufficient head of steam, my grandfather would incorporate them into the telling as visual aids with a dramatic flourish.

With eyes frantically scanning the room he would locate a tin tray, proclaiming “Golden Nugget Casino, Vegas,” and stab his cigarette toward it while beginning a tale about a spectacular evening spent watching Sammy Davis Jr. in concert. The pottery ashtray with “Virginia Is for Lovers” glazed into the rim could trigger a rumination about either a walk across Civil War battlefields, or a particularly unforgettable “kosher” hot dog he had procured from the snack bar. To my grandfather, these and countless other objects in his collection were no mere tchotchkes. Their importance lay in the sense memory they triggered, and he afforded them the reverence archaeologists bestow upon Stone Age relics.

Pride of place was reserved for a miniature Statue of Liberty replica made of die-cast metal, which sat on the mantel above the fireplace alongside a similar souvenir of the Empire State Building. My grandfather treated it with the pride I imagine explorer Francisco Pizarro afforded to the first potato he had sailed back from the Americas to present to the Spanish court in 1532. Such was its power that even though my grandpa carried some girth—an adorable potbelly stomach honed over many hours spent watching television on the couch—one look at Lady Liberty would compel him to spring up to his feet so we could marvel upon her together. After sweeping it off the mantel into his meaty hand, Grandpa would shunt his spectacles back onto his forehead, squint his eyes, and read the inscription on the base in a unique English accent that combined inflections of both Yiddish and Scouse. “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” he’d slowly intone. “The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.” We would then stand together in a reverent silence. A grandparent, a grandson, and a cheap tourist souvenir, contemplative until my grandfather would inevitably whisper, “We should have lived there.”

Because of those shared moments, I loved that statue and worked to bless it with the kind of covetous gaze that let a grandparent know a grandchild wanted it for himself, an unspoken request to which my grandfather ultimately relented. But back when it was still a

fixture on his fireplace, my grandfather would eventually drag himself back to the sanctuary of his couch with heavy legs. After taking out his false front teeth and placing them on his side table, he would chew meditatively on a packet of nougats in silence until he dozed off, head tilted to the left, with mouth ajar.

I would gaze at him across the chessboard with its game unfinished and wonder what he could be

To my grandfather, his countless objects from America were no mere tchotchkes. He afforded them the reverence bestowed upon Stone Age relics.

dreaming about in those moments.

With our evening clearly over, it was time to head home. I would locate my grandmother baking somewhere in her kitchen, kiss her goodbye, and skip across Menlove Avenue, a once grand, yet still well-trafficked road that separated my home from theirs. The central divide was pockmarked by oily puddles filled with orphaned crisp packets and crushed, empty beer cans. I trooped through them, most often in a light drizzling rain.

Once back home, I would quickly pop my head into the living room, where my family would inevitably be glued to the television. I preferred to charge upstairs into my room and voluntarily put myself to bed. After hauling a giant volume from my bookshelf, I would lie under the covers, alone with my copy of *Alistair Cooke’s America*, a grand, hardback tome that my grandfather had gifted me for my seventh birthday. The book traced the arc of America’s history from founding to present day. I mostly loved it because it was identical to the one my grandfather kept by his own bed.

Under the warm glow of my bedside light, I would flip through the pages, ignoring the words and feasting on the color plates. While staring at a stock photograph of an empty highway in the middle of Utah, I’d hear my grandfather’s voice from nights when we had savored the book together. “Look at that road,” he’d marvel. “Now, that’s a road.” The image titled “Bison in Montana” would remind me of him gasping “That’s a big unit,” a comment that automatically conjured images of him ill-advisedly attempting to drive his arm up the bison’s anus. Quickly turning to “Farmland in Kansas,” I could hear his voice filled with longing. “Have you ever seen such wheat, Rog?” 🐾

How U.S. Schools Became Obsessed with Race

Critical race theory took over in two ways:
first gradually, then suddenly

By Robert Pondiscio

WE HAVE BEEN inundated of late with alarming stories about the radical transformation of schooling in the wake of George Floyd's death last summer and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. To mention just a few: We hear of third-graders in Cupertino, Cali-

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fornia (home of Apple) forced to discuss their racial and sexual identities and rank themselves according to their "power and privilege." We read about a New York City principal asking parents to determine which of eight "white identities" best describes them—from "white supremacist" to "white abolitionist"—and seeking their commitment to "dismantling whiteness and not allowing whiteness to reassert itself." And we've seen reports of an Arizona state education department's "equity toolkit" titled "They're not too young to talk about race!" which recommends that white parents "can and should begin addressing issues of race and racism early, even before their children can speak."

University schools of education have long seen themselves as an instrument for remaking society along lines more congenial to social-justice activists.

The daily drumbeat suggests there has been a violent leftward lurch in public education in the past year, but is it really something new? Critical race theory and “anti-racism” came to dominate K–12 education in two ways: gradually, then suddenly.

From the nation’s founding through the mid-19th century, education theorists from Benjamin Rush to Horace Mann hewed to the notion that a republic cannot long remain ignorant and free—hence the need for free and universal public education. From these founding ideals of citizen-making, Americans drifted over time to see education as serving chiefly private purposes, even if it also advances the commonweal. We expect schools to help our children get along with others and prepare academically for college and career, and to otherwise shepherd them toward a fruitful adult life. But as a profession, education has a long history of seeing schools as agencies to promote whatever was on the mind of “progressive” reformers of the era—from abolition, temperance, and turning immigrants into assimilated English-speaking citizens over a century ago, to promoting bilingualism and raising awareness of climate change more recently. As the education-reform veteran Chester E. Finn Jr. observes, “schools have long seemed like a swell place for adult causes to try to enlist kids.”

Education’s present focus is identifying and correcting racial inequity. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the current racialized view of American K–12 education and its outcomes is the exclusive project of classroom radicals and doctrinaire race and gender-studies theorists. A generation of teachers, administrators, and policymakers has been trained, encouraged, and even required by law to view their work through the lens of racial disparity. The “woke” revolution roiling our schools, with its Manichean view of oppressors vs. oppressed, is an overnight development that has been decades in the making. “Wokeness” on college campuses seeped into teacher training decades ago, while university schools of education have long seen themselves as an instrument for remaking society along lines more congenial to social justice activists.

LET’S START with California. Over the past two decades, its test scores, which once led the nation, have flagged. Its long-standing dominion

over textbook content, which came about because of the sheer size of the state’s student population, has faded thanks to technology-driven changes in the publishing market. But now it has once again become a K–12 bellwether owing to the adoption by the state’s board of education in March of a controversial ethnic-studies curriculum. For now, that curriculum is voluntary, but not for long. A law that would have required every student in the state to take and pass a one-semester ethnic-studies course in order to graduate was vetoed by Governor Gavin Newsom last year, but it has been reintroduced and is widely expected to pass. Many districts are moving forward anyway. Ethnic studies will be a graduation requirement in Los Angeles schools starting with the 2023–24 school year. Fresno, the state’s third-largest district, will require two semesters of ethnic studies starting this fall.

California’s “model curriculum” was met with intense debate and criticism when the initial draft was released in 2019. The state’s department of education received over 21,000 comments on the document, most criticizing it as one-sided or prejudiced. Jewish groups insisted the curriculum didn’t accurately reflect the American Jewish experience, and contained anti-Semitic lessons and ideas, including references to Israeli oppression of Palestinians. Since then, activists, advocates, and angry Twitter mobs have waged war over subsequent drafts, arguing over which groups and people deserved greater representation, and which offensive or misleading portrayals should be massaged or removed.

But these battles, however earnestly fought, betray a fundamental misunderstanding about what gets taught, and how difficult it is to keep inaccurate and even pernicious ideas out of American classrooms. Curricula are not handed down to teachers on stone tablets. Indeed, they are seldom, perhaps never, taught as written. What gets in front of students in most American classrooms is largely up to teacher discretion, making it nearly impossible to control—or even monitor—the content of children’s education or the ideals and values being valorized by their teachers. If the many factions battling over California’s model curriculum did so believing the fight would determine the shape that ethnic studies will take in classrooms, they were almost certainly mistaken.

Teachers, either individually or in grade-level or subject-matter ‘teams,’ decide for themselves what gets put in front of children—with little if any oversight.

Nearly every teacher in America—99 percent of elementary teachers, 96 percent of secondary-school teachers—draws upon “materials I developed and/or selected myself” in teaching English language arts, according to a RAND Corporation study. Google and Pinterest are the two most common sources of curricular materials cited by teachers. Nearly three out of four social-studies teachers in a separate RAND report agreed with the statement “Textbooks are becoming less and less important in my classroom.” Materials that teachers “found, modified, or created from scratch” make up the majority of what gets taught. Only one in four secondary-school social-studies teachers cited resources “provided by my school or district” as composing the majority of what they use in class on a given day.

Moreover, all this curriculum curation, creation, customization, and tinkering is not regarded as a flaw, but a *feature* of classroom practice. Teachers are trained to “differentiate instruction,” adapting or supplementing the curriculum to make it more engaging, accessible, or challenging based on the needs of individual students. Academic standards like Common Core mostly dictate the “skills” students are expected to demonstrate; they are largely silent on the specific content kids should learn. These practices and habits weigh heavily on the use of controversial curricula, whether officially “adopted” or not. Outsiders assume far more top-down control over classroom content than actually exists.

A good example of the “choose your own adventure” nature of curricula and instruction is the *New York Times*’ hotly debated 1619 Project, a conscious bid to “reframe” the conception of America from a democratic republic founded in 1776 to a “slavocracy” that began with the arrival of the first Africans in 1619. It put forth several widely discredited ideas as fact, including that the American Revolution was fought primarily to preserve slavery, and the claim of provocateur Nikole Hannah-Jones that “for the most part...black Americans fought back alone” against racism. The *Wall Street Journal* quoted Civil War historian James McPherson, who criticized the project’s “implicit position that there have never been any good white people, thereby ignoring white radicals and even liberals who have supported racial equality.”

Given these charged assertions, intense and

acrimonious debate, and the 1619 Project’s dour view of American history, one might expect school boards, districts, and schools to exercise care and caution before formally adopting it for classroom use. And this appears to be so. A vanishingly small number of school districts has expressly authorized it for use in their schools, including Chicago, Buffalo, and Newark, New Jersey. However, the website for the Pulitzer Center, which partnered with the *Times* to produce a free and downloadable 1619 Project curriculum for K–12 classrooms, says it’s in use in all 50 states. There is no reason to suspect that the Pulitzer Center is exaggerating its claim to have “connected 4,500 classrooms...with the work of Nikole Hannah-Jones and her collaborators.” It’s a telltale glimpse of how controversial materials find their way into American classrooms. Teachers are doing what teachers do: searching, sampling, looking for lessons and readings on a given day to engage students, differentiate instruction, or launch a classroom discussion. It is impossible to know with any confidence the conditions under which selections from the 1619 Project are being introduced or discussed, what other readings are also assigned, or if any opposing points of view are offered. The classroom is a black box. Teachers, either individually or in grade-level or subject-matter “teams,” decide for themselves what gets read, discussed, and put in front of children—with little if any oversight.

Compare California’s ethnic-studies “model curriculum” with a more familiar example: the Advanced Placement, or AP, program. It is commonly assumed that the course content of an AP class is the same, regardless of where it is taught or by whom. However, the College Board (which administers the AP test) issues only curriculum “frameworks.” There are no mandatory sequences of lessons, texts, and assignments. The standardized end-of-course AP exam creates an incentive to follow the framework so that students can earn college credit with a passing score. No such normalizing pressure would exist in California. There is no reason to expect any two ethnic-studies classes offered anywhere in the state—or any state—to be the same or even similar. Without the restraining effect of a single final exam, it will fall entirely to the attitudes, beliefs, and discernment of individual teachers—and in some cases their whims and prejudices—to fulfill ethnic-studies require-

Established limits on teacher speech have not inhibited many educators who view moral grandstanding as not a problem in teaching, but rather the point.

ments, with no clear and reliable visibility for parents, taxpayers, and other “stakeholders.”

California’s effort is the most far-reaching ethnic-studies initiative, but it’s not unique. When he was Connecticut’s education commissioner, Miguel Cardona—now Joe Biden’s secretary of education—oversaw the creation of America’s first state-mandated ethnic-studies course, which Max Eden of the American Enterprise Institute derided as “an intellectually shoddy exercise in ideological indoctrination.” Cardona’s Department of Education cannot impose an ethnic-studies mandate on the states, but Eden speculates that Cardona “could advocate for it from the bully pulpit of his Cabinet-level position and use other levers at his disposal, most notably the Education Department’s Office for Civil Rights, to advance critical race ideology in K–12 schools.” In many instances, he would be preaching to the choir: At least eight other states, including Texas, Virginia, Vermont, and Oregon already require schools to offer some form of ethnic studies as an elective, with more on the way.

The immense variability of the quality and content of schooling between and within states, districts, and schools, even across the hall in the same school, is an unintended consequence of how America organizes and runs public education—and one that contributes to the challenge of influencing (or even knowing) what gets taught. Other nations’ school systems tend to be more pluralistic than those in the U.S., with all manner of schools, even private and parochial schools, eligible for government support. But unlike many other countries, the U.S. lacks a national curriculum. The words “school” and “education” do not even appear in the U.S. Constitution. The result is 13,000 American school districts, each under state and local control.

But the crazy-quilt variability of public education is in one significant way still quite surprising. The tradition of “academic freedom” that protects classroom speech and course content in higher education generally doesn’t apply to K–12 public-school teachers. Courts have repeatedly affirmed that local school boards wield nearly complete power to set curricula. In the eyes of the law, public-school teachers are considered “hired speech.” In 2007, for example, the Supreme Court declined to hear the appeal of a former Indiana teacher who claimed to have lost her job

because she criticized the impending Iraq war in ways that upset students and parents. “The First Amendment does not entitle primary and secondary teachers, when conducting the education of captive audiences, to cover topics, or advocate viewpoints, that depart from the curriculum adopted by the school system,” a three-judge federal appeals panel said unanimously. Such decisions should, at least in theory, inhibit teachers from introducing controversial material without proper vetting or from being overtly opinionated on sensitive subjects.

It is no defense for teachers to claim, as they often do, that they are expressing their personal views in solidarity with students. During the Brett Kavanaugh hearings, a California math teacher earned tens of thousands of Twitter “likes” and retweets when he asked with anguish what he was supposed to say to his students if Kavanaugh was confirmed. Some wondered why a math teacher would feel compelled to raise the subject at all. Joshua Dunn, a political-science professor at the University of Colorado–Colorado Springs, describes such displays as an unacceptable form of “moral grandstanding” by teachers. But the well-established limits on teacher speech and conduct have not inhibited a significant number of educators who are inclined to view moral grandstanding as not a problem in teaching, but rather the point.

Heather Levine, an English teacher in Lawrence, Massachusetts, ignited a social-media firestorm last year when she tweeted that she was “Very proud to say we got the *Odyssey* removed from the curriculum this year!” She is part of a movement called #DisruptTexts, which describes itself as “a crowdsourced, grassroots effort by teachers *for* teachers to challenge the traditional canon” and to “aid and develop teachers committed to anti-racist/anti-bias teaching pedagogy and practices.” When a writer with the *Wall Street Journal* contacted her about it, Levine huffed that she found her inquiry “invasive.” When the piece criticizing #DisruptTexts appeared, she took to Twitter again to complain that she had been named and her tweet had been quoted “without my knowledge or consent”—suggesting the degree to which she assumed complete control with no public scrutiny, even of words she wrote online for all the world to see. The decision to drop Homer, she explained, was simply a choice made

When I received my own master's degree in elementary education 20 years ago, I was judged in part on how well my work demonstrated a 'commitment to social justice.'

by her school's ninth grade team. "It was not a blanket school or district-wide decision and any teacher, including myself, would still be more than welcome to teach from the text," Levine wrote.

It would obviously be impractical for school boards to weigh in on every instructional decision made in the schools they oversee. But given the weight of court decisions and divisive debates over curricula, simple prudence would seem to suggest a minimal level of professional awareness that potentially controversial instructional decisions might require some level of approval or authorization from a school administrator or district supervisor. Levine's what's-the-big-deal explanation was intended to reassure. But it raises more questions than it answers. Where *do* teachers get the idea that they have the right—even the duty—to "disrupt texts," challenge the canon, or engage in vocal "allyship" with their students?

WE SHOULD not assume that all, or even most, of America's nearly 4 million classroom teachers are closet activists or social-justice warriors determined to indoctrinate impressionable children in the woke catechism of the radical left. They are merely doing what they have been trained, encouraged, and habituated to do at every stage of their careers, starting in ed school.

University schools of education enjoy a near-monopoly on teacher training and credentialing in the U.S. By the time the American Educational Research Association issued its comprehensive review of teacher education in 2005, it reported that "over the last decade or so conceptualizing teaching and teacher education in terms of social justice has been the central animating idea for education scholars and practitioners who connect their work to larger critical movements. Advocates of a social justice agenda want teachers to be professional educators as well as activists committed to diminishing the inequities of American society." Remember: That report came out 16 years ago. So if critical race theory is new to you, it means you haven't set foot in a college of education in the past 30 years. When I received my own master's degree in elementary education 20 years ago, my portfolio was judged in part on how well my work demonstrated a "commitment to social justice" as a disposition ex-

pected of teachers who can become "agents of change." In the early 20th century, George S. Counts, the intellectual forefather of critical pedagogy and among the most prominent education thinkers of his time, was proposing that teachers and schools "dare to build a new social order."

This social reordering and change agency is not the exclusive hobby horse of the progressive left. The activist conception of the teaching profession actually dovetailed with the agenda of the education-reform movement, beloved by many conservatives, which was at the peak of its power, prestige, and moral authority in the first decade of this century. Union-free charter schools staffed by earnest and hard-charging Teach For America corps members who were determined to attack and reverse the "soft bigotry of low expectations" made media darlings of high-performing charter schools like KIPP and Success Academy. Movies such as *Waiting for Superman* helped build bipartisan support for the reform agenda of charter schools, standardized testing, and teacher accountability. The 2002 federal No Child Left Behind Act explicitly made "closing the achievement gap...especially the achievement gaps between minority and non-minority students" a matter of national urgency.

Writing in *National Review* in 2015, the American Enterprise Institute's Rick Hess described the bipartisan détente that allowed the reform agenda to set the tone for public education for most of this century: "Conservatives embraced education as the foundation of an opportunity society and a path to eventually shrinking the welfare state. Liberals approached schooling as a way to address poverty." To forge this consensus, "conservative reformers made several key concessions," Hess wrote. "They accepted a massive increase in federal authority, an expansion of race-conscious accountability systems, and a prohibition on talk of parental responsibility and the virtues of the traditional family." Liberal reformers gave up less ground. "They mostly toned down their demands for new public programs and took care not to accuse their conservative allies of bigotry," Hess observed.

In sum, professional education emphasizing social-justice imperatives and more than two decades of public policy aimed at gap-closing had racialized K-12 education long before "critical race theory" be-

The tortured logic of ‘whiteness’ as the theory that explains all ills in education threatens to erase, at a stroke, decades of efforts on behalf of minority children.

came a buzz phrase and a political football. If you are under age 40 and work in an American school—public, private, or charter—you likely have no professional memory of a time when ending racial inequity was not the primary focus of your field. The anodyne language of “anti-racism” (who isn’t opposed to racism?) merely lands as the latest effort in a decades-long effort to improve education outcomes for students of color, among the least likely to have received a rich and rigorous education, or to have been launched from their K–12 public school on a path to equal opportunity, upward mobility, and fair and equal treatment in civil society. Teachers cannot have failed to learn that among their profession’s most solemn obligations is to close the achievement gap. Until recently, that has meant some combination of higher standards, testing, improved teacher quality, rich and rigorous curricula, or enhanced school choice for low-income families, among other favored programs and policies.

Ibram X. Kendi, the leading figure in the “anti-racism” movement, is not interested in closing the achievement gap. Neither is he concerned with raising achievement among black and brown students—at least by any measure known to social science. “Standardized tests have become the most effective racist weapon ever devised to objectively degrade Black minds and legally exclude their bodies,” insists the author of *How to Be an Antiracist*. Neither is it merely the tests that are racist; no, it’s the achievement gap itself. “To believe in the existence of any sort of racial hierarchy is actually to believe in a racist idea,” Kendi writes. “The achievement gap between the races—with Whites and Asians at the top and Blacks and Latinos at the bottom—is a racial hierarchy. And this popular racial hierarchy has been constructed by our religious faith in standardized testing.”

Even by the standards of testing critics, who are legion, this is a remarkable assertion. Forget our long obsession with gap-closing and teaching for social justice. The mere belief in the existence of an achievement gap is transmuted into racism. “Our faith in standardized tests causes us to believe that the racial gap in test scores means something is wrong with the Black test takers—and not the tests,” Kendi writes. But this is poor scholarship at best, and at worst a deliberate falsehood. The vast weight of education policy,

practice, and reform efforts has rested on precisely the opposite assumption: that there is *nothing* wrong with black test takers. The presence of measurable disparities in student achievement has been broadly viewed by generations of education reformers as evidence of systematic failure: of teachers, schools, and districts. These are adult failures all. The children are blameless.

Denying the existence of such gaps or casting even the discussion of them as racist has proved to be too much even for some progressives. Writing in the *Washington Post*, Matthew Yglesias noted: “The fact remains that if African American children continue to be less likely to learn to read and write and do math than White children, and less likely to graduate from high school, then this will contribute to other unequal outcomes down the road,” including the ability to organize politically and effectively navigate the world beyond school. “Stigmatizing the use of test scores and grades to measure learning undermines policymakers’ ability to make the case for reforms to promote equity,” Yglesias concluded, including “combating racially biased low expectations among teachers.”

Alas, high expectations for black and brown children are now an object of suspicion. In 2019, New York City Department of Education leaders attended a workshop where they were told that values such as hard work, individualism, objectivity, and “worship of the written word” were hallmarks of “white supremacy culture.” Under Cindy Marten, Biden’s pick for deputy education secretary, San Diego’s effort to become “an antiracist school district” prohibits teachers from factoring into students’ grades their classroom behavior and whether or not they turned in assignments. The pernicious effects of this line of thought were unintentionally revealed by a white high-school student who told a local TV station that inequities are so strong that it’s “not fair of us to put forth policies that only cater to the students that are able to meet these requirements.”

If veteran educators have responded with dismay, even horror, at the tortured logic of “whiteness” as the theory that explains all ills in education, it’s because it threatens to erase, at a stroke, decades of efforts on behalf of minority children. The most improbable triumph of the anti-racist orthodoxy promoted by Kendi and his acolytes has been in schools that until now have been proof points of its emptiness. If any

This grim orthodoxy has been gaining ground in American K–12 education for two generations, and the challenge of dislodging it from schools should not be underestimated.

institutions in American education have earned the right in the past 30 years to claim the title as genuinely “anti-racist,” it’s the networks of high-performing urban charter-school networks such as KIPP, Achievement First, Uncommon Schools, and others. KIPP, which runs nearly 250 schools in 20 states, has had unparalleled success in ushering low-income black and brown students to and through college, but last summer, co-founder David Levin issued a public apology for building KIPP on “white supremacy and anti-Blackness.” The network announced it was retiring its trademark “Work Hard. Be Nice” slogan because, Levin said, it “supports the illusion of meritocracy... ignores the significant effort required to dismantle systemic racism,” and places a value on “being compliant and submissive.” This was a stunning repudiation of the core values that have made KIPP a magnet for parents of color desperate for an alternative to chaotic and disorderly neighborhood schools where low expectations, for staff and students alike, have been the rule for generations.

The founder of one urban charter network told me recently of his struggle to reconcile the desires of low-income black and brown parents “who are bought into the American Dream, hard work, education, character building, and rigor” with pressure from a vocal group of privileged and progressive teachers who bridle against his schools’ traditional curriculum and high academic expectations. “However, I really don’t know any other way to improve students’ future lives other than a rigorous education,” he said.

PUBLIC EDUCATION succeeds or fails at one principal task: A school either imparts the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to smooth the transition to a responsible and satisfying adult life, or it does not. In concert with other institutions (families, churches, the military, et al.), an American school can consciously inspire children to play a part in building a more perfect union. Or it can say, in effect, don’t bother. Hardened into orthodoxy, critical race theory insists on the latter. When it demands a place of privilege in our schools, it undermines the very purpose of public education. It is the opposite of welcoming children into the civic sphere; it preaches resistance to it and even its destruction.

To be clear, there is nothing inherently wrong with ethnic studies, “culturally responsive pedagogy,” or even critical race theory in public schools. No reasonable objection should be made or accepted to the earnest desire for black and brown students—*American children*—to see their histories and cultures woven firmly into their education. Nor should any excuse be made to elide our country’s painful history of racism and injustices, or to confront places where there remains room for progress. What schools cannot do while maintaining public support and legitimacy is to abide any kind of racial essentialism or insist that children are required to combat “whiteness.” Schools should not seek to impose an ideology that distills all of history and every human endeavor to a struggle between oppressors and the oppressed.

But this grim orthodoxy has been gaining ground in American K–12 education for two generations, and the challenge of dislodging it from schools should not be underestimated. While some states like California weigh ethnic-studies mandates, others, like Florida, Georgia, Arkansas, and New Hampshire, are debating measures “banning” schools altogether from teaching critical race theory and curricula like the 1619 Project. “There is no room in our classrooms for things like critical race theory,” said Florida Governor Ron DeSantis. “Teaching kids to hate their country and to hate each other is not worth one red cent of taxpayer money.” Although well-intentioned and reflecting the discomfort many parents feel with regard to what their children are being taught, such measures erode freedom of expression and would be exceedingly difficult to enforce. It is simply not possible to ban a perspective from schools, particularly one that has been embraced for so long by so many educators.


The picture that emerges, finally, is of an education system drifting into conflict with the ambitions of parents for their children and the public purpose of preparing America’s children for productive adulthood and engaged citizenship. However well-intended their motivations might be, individual teachers cannot assume for themselves powers and privileges that are not theirs to assume. In *How to Be an Antiracist*, Kendi writes, “If discrimination is creating equity, then it is antiracist.” Taken seriously, this is a direct encouragement for schools to treat children differently based

As long as public education runs on tax dollars and public goodwill, the anti-racist ‘equity’ agenda and the broader impulse toward ‘equality’ will continue to be in tension.

on their race. Elsewhere he states the remedy to his unusually expansive definition of racism even more directly: “The only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination. The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination.”

It is unlikely that ordinary Americans, if they follow this idea where it leads—schools making a virtue of treating children differently based on race alone—will abide sending their children to consciously “anti-racist” schools. The immense disparities in talent and skill of the nation’s massive corps of teachers and the fad-driven nature of education make it inevitable that there will continue to be bizarre applications of its tenets, such as teaching children chants to Aztec gods, teachers calling students not “boys and girls” but “social-justice warriors,” or professional-development sessions aimed at getting teachers to reckon with the effects of their “whiteness.” Adherents may complain that such incidents are a distraction or examples of poor implementation of a subtle and nuanced suite of ideas. But as long as public education runs on tax dollars and public goodwill, the anti-racist “equity”

agenda and the broader impulse toward “equality” will continue to be in tension with each other. School-choice adherents see in all this an argument for school choice, but as Bari Weiss has documented, elite private schools have drunk even more deeply of anti-racism pedagogy and curricula than have public and charter schools.

Ultimately, something has to give. The cost of public education is socialized in America; you pay school taxes regardless of whether or not you have children in public school or have children at all. If our schools encourage a belief that the United States is a fundamentally racist country, and that every institution is designed to maintain white supremacy and cannot be reformed, then it inevitably sets schools on a collision course with the society that supports them. Whether it’s a conscious institutional attempt to be “anti-racist” or merely that an intellectual monoculture has taken root among educators, the effect will be akin to an organism devouring its host. No sane nation will long tolerate an institution whose purpose is to set its children against itself at public expense. 

Union Busted

The villains of the pandemic are the leaders of America's teachers' unions

By Christine Rosen

PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN likes to talk about “inflection points” in American history, usually when he’s describing his sweeping, progressive policy agenda and his sense of his administration’s importance as the nation recovers from a global pandemic. But true inflection points are usually visible only in retrospect, and one in particular might prove to have a more lasting and negative impact on his legacy than he realizes.

It happened in early February 2021, when Rochelle Walensky, Biden’s new director of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), told the press that “there is increasing data to suggest that schools can safely

reopen and that safe reopening does not suggest that teachers need to be vaccinated.” She added that “vaccinations of teachers is not a prerequisite for safely reopening schools.”

This was overwhelmingly welcome news for the millions of schoolchildren who had not set foot in a classroom since the previous spring—and it had a bipartisan tinge because it echoed the policy approach of red-state governors such as Florida’s Ron DeSantis, who had safely reopened schools in the fall.

It didn’t last. Within hours, the Biden administration was publicly undermining its own health official. White House press secretary Jen Psaki said that when Walensky discussed school reopenings, she had been speaking in her “personal capacity,” not her official role—a patently ridiculous claim given that Walensky made the remarks during a White House COVID briefing.

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Why the backpedaling? Simple: Saying it was safe to go back to school had angered one of the Biden administration's most committed and powerful constituencies: the teachers' unions. At the time, the American Federation of Teachers—an umbrella group that constitutes the second-largest such union in the country and one with no scientific or public-health expertise as part of its remit—was involved in shaping CDC recommendations for schools. Calls and emails and meetings between the AFT's president, Randi Weingarten, and her staff with representatives from the White House and Walensky herself reveal just how influential the unions were when it came to policymaking at the CDC. Those communications were undisclosed at the time.

The *New York Post* broke the story in early May, using Freedom of Information Act requests that compelled the release of government emails. "In at least two instances," the *Post* noted, language 'suggestions' offered by the union were adopted nearly verbatim into the final text of the CDC document." Union officials demanded the inclusion of language that would limit the ability of schools to reopen fully. Here was a sentence offered by the AFT: "In the event of high community-transmission results from a new variant of SARS-CoV-2, a new update of these guidelines may be necessary." A nearly verbatim version of that sentence appeared on page 22 of the final CDC guidance.

The AFT also wanted the guidance to allow for teachers "who have documented high-risk conditions or who are at increased risk for ... COVID-19" as well as "staff who have a household member" at risk to continue to work remotely, and so the final guidance included that as well. A February 11 letter further demanded that the CDC include specific, union-approved language about mitigation strategies and expressed concern about "the absence of a closure threshold" for schools.

Additional documents and emails obtained through a FOIA request by parents in Virginia reveal an unctuous Walensky emailing AFT leaders February 3 to "extend my gratitude for the language you have provided us below." Walensky assured union leaders, "I wanted to be certain you knew it was being worked into (with just a few small tweaks) the school opening guidance. We have also included the executive summary you suggested. Please know we are listening and working hard to ensure your confidence and partnership in this endeavor."

The CDC's "partner" must have been pleased

with the results. In a February 12 press release, Weingarten praised the new guidance: "Today, the CDC met fear of the pandemic with facts and evidence. For the first time since the start of this pandemic, we have a rigorous road map, based on science, that our members can use to fight for a safe reopening."

Weingarten cited "successful reopening strategies in New York City, Boston and Washington, D.C." as well as the "\$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan" for "creating a culture of trust and collaboration with educators and parents." At the time, these supposedly

Stakeholders aren't afraid to exercise their power. When the story broke about teachers' union influence over the CDC, Randi Weingarten was unrepentant.

"successful reopening strategies" had done little to help the majority of public-school students in those same cities; most students were still being denied in-person schooling.

As an example of scientifically grounded, reasonable public-health policy, the CDC's February guidelines were an abject failure. Their adoption by many districts unnecessarily prolonged the closure of many schools. But they represented a triumph of what *Reason's* Matt Welch has called the new "stakeholder science"—in which authoritative institutions make dubious decisions based on political pressure and then see themselves used as the authority for the dubious assumptions behind the politically motivated action.

The stakeholders aren't afraid to exercise their power. When the story broke about union influence over the CDC, Weingarten was unrepentant, complaining on Twitter that the *Post* was "trying to make everyday advocacy look nefarious" and insisting, "This article describes basic advocacy. It's not mysterious or clandestine. It's routine."

She's right. Teachers' union meddling in crucial public-health decision-making was instantly a feature, not a bug, of the Biden administration. Weingarten is particularly cozy with the Bidens, and there are pictures of her hugging the president (when he was on the campaign trail) and exchanging friendly messages on social media. According to Bloomberg News, on Biden's first full day in office, January 21, First Lady Jill Biden "hosted the leaders of the country's major teachers' unions" at the White House. In May, Jill Biden tweeted thanks to Weingarten "for your leadership and friendship!"

Walensky's spokesperson at the CDC defended the institution's amenability to union lobbying: "As part of long-standing best practices, CDC has traditionally engaged with organizations and groups that are impacted by guidance and recommendations issued by the agency."

And yet there was one group, arguably the one most "impacted" by the CDC guidance, who was never welcomed into this discussion (nor would they have known about it had reporters and a few frustrated parents not made FOIA requests): the parents of public-school children.

UNDERSTANDING the power and the hubris of today's teachers' unions requires revisiting the story of how teachers came to be viewed (and came to view themselves) as a heroic profession deserving of more resources and more respect.

In 1983, President Ronald Reagan's education department issued a famous report called "A Nation at Risk" that painted a bleak portrait of American schools. "The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and as a people," the report argued. The sense of crisis spurred calls for better funding for schools, education reform, and efforts to improve the quality of teachers.

At the time the report was issued, the AFT had more than 600,000 members. In the ensuing decades, unions capitalized on public concern about the educational crisis to argue that teachers were underpaid

dards and goalposts in the legislation for student performance. Similarly, President Obama's Race to the Top initiative in 2009 introduced Common Core standards and teacher-evaluation procedures opposed by the unions.

But in recent years, unions have taken a more confrontational and politically activist stance. Teacher strikes in Oklahoma, West Virginia, and Kentucky in 2018 included significant demands for pay raises, which the teachers won. Extensive collective-bargaining rights have given unions more control over their workplace conditions, and with each victory, union bosses realized they need not be merely one part of the Democratic Party machine. Rather, they saw a path to becoming the dominating forces in that machine, particularly in deep-blue cites where Democrats effectively exercised one-party rule.

Today, two national teachers' unions—the AFT and the National Education Association (NEA)—along with state, regional, and local teachers' unions (and principals' unions) form the largest and most powerful bloc of Democratic Party activists. The National Education Association is the nation's largest public-sector union, with 3 million members, but it is Weingarten, the head of the 1.7-million-member AFT, who enjoys the most public visibility.

Unions have solidified their alliance with Democratic politicians, whose election coffers they fill with donations and whose campaigns they help to staff. As *EducationNext* notes: "Since 1990, the AFT and the NEA have regularly been among the top 10 contributors to federal electoral campaigns. They have forged an alliance with the Democratic Party, which receives the vast majority of their hard-money campaign contributions as well as in-kind contributions for get-out-the-vote operations." In 2020, the AFT spent more than

With each victory, union bosses saw a path to becoming the dominating forces in the Democratic Party machine, particularly in deep-blue cites.

and overworked. At the local and state level, unions made perennial demands on schools to hire more teachers and to provide them with the protections of tenure—while strenuously resisting reforms such as charter schools and school vouchers that might have undermined their power.

But when it came to policymaking, unions did not play a key role at the federal level, and their demands and objections were often ignored. The No Child Left Behind Act proposed by George W. Bush's administration in 2001 was embraced by liberal hero Ted Kennedy and many Democrats even though the major teachers' unions did not approve of the stan-

\$20 million on political donations, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. All of it went to Liberal or Democratic candidates or organizations.

WHEN PANDEMIC lockdowns began in March 2020 and schools closed as part of the effort to save lives, most Americans gave their local officials the benefit of the doubt about the wisdom of doing so. Fear and anxiety were understandably widespread, and the science about the risks of transmission in school settings was still uncertain.

But as spring and summer wore on, some school officials, citing the changing evidence that COVID

infections were rarely fatal for the young and that schools could safely be reopened with proper mitigation strategies, made plans to reopen in the fall. One study of schools in North Carolina by researchers at Duke University, published in *Pediatrics*, found a very low rate of in-school transmission of COVID. Many pediatrics and public-health experts published evidence that schools were safe, and urged reopening, especially as evidence mounted of the costs to children of distance learning. Private and parochial schools across the country were determined to reopen in person.

But America's public educators, led by their unions, believed that any risk was too great. The majority of public-school teachers refused to return to classrooms even as they praised themselves for being brave "essential workers," as Weingarten called them at the union's annual convention last summer. In fact, as a study of COVID deaths in the *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* found, education, training, and library workers are among the lowest-risk workers. Health-care workers faced 10 times the COVID mortality risk of teachers.

In the fall, as private and parochial schools reopened for in-person school, the nation's public-school students were left with subpar virtual-learning options and a lot of empty promises. The public schools that did manage to reopen had one thing in common, however: They were in areas with weaker unions. As Corey DeAngelis of the Reason Foundation found, the "relationship between unionization and reopening decisions remains substantively and statistically significant even after controlling for school district size and coronavirus deaths and cases per capita in the county during the month of July." The "Return to Learn" school-reopening tracker of the American Enterprise Institute found that "districts in counties that voted for Joe Biden have three times the percentage of fully remote districts compared to counties that voted for Donald Trump."

School districts that attempted to reopen regardless of union opposition met considerable resistance. In Fairfax County, Virginia, for example, teachers staged protests (and later an illegal "sick-out") when local officials announced that students with disabilities could return to in-person learning. Unionized teachers went to the parking lots of schools where students with disabilities were returning to school and protested those kids—the most vulnerable children—and their parents in an effort to keep schools closed.

In Los Angeles, the second-largest school district in the nation with more than half a million students, students have spent the entire 2020–2021 school year in virtual learning. Meanwhile, the union there has spent its time issuing a range of demands that must be met if they are to return to their jobs, including Medicare for All, defunding the police, and a ban on charter schools. "Normal wasn't working for us before. We can't go back," the union declared.

Led by their unions, most public-school teachers refused to return to classrooms even as they praised themselves for being brave 'essential workers.'

In March 2021, when California Governor Newsom urged teachers to return to classrooms, 91 percent of Los Angeles teachers' union members voted to refuse to return to in-person teaching, citing safety concerns. "UTLA members have voted overwhelmingly to resist a premature and unsafe physical return to school sites," a spokesperson said. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the union also called the state's efforts to reopen schools "a recipe for propagating structural racism."

The Chicago Teachers Union, which also delayed and obstructed a return to in-person learning, had time to create and circulate a dance video on social media featuring high-stepping teachers. This happened even as a report by ABC7 Chicago in March found that in many high schools in the city, almost half of students have never bothered to show up for their remote classes, a common problem in cities where unions dominate—and where high schools have been closed for more than a year.

Even after teachers were given priority for vaccination in many states—ahead of cancer patients and other at-risk individuals—they still refused to return to the classroom and continued to talk about COVID risks in apocalyptic terms. Seattle fifth-grade teacher Danielle Woods told a local radio station that "the vaccine is not a silver bullet. The vaccine is going to reduce risk but it's not going to go to zero." In Cleveland, union president Shari Obrenski told local news outlets, "Having a vaccination, and a first dose of a vaccination, doesn't keep you from getting COVID. My vaccination does not help my students. My students are still at risk for COVID." In Chicago, Stacy Davis Gates, vice president of the Chicago Teachers Union, said, "Our members took a vote to keep learning remotely to avoid disaster."

In other words, at every point, when scientific evidence demonstrated that schools were safe to reopen, the unions balked at returning to work. When the CDC announced in the spring that it was going to change the six-foot distancing rule in schools to three feet, which would allow for more students to return to in-person learning, the AFT's Weingarten was apoplectic. "They are compromising the one enduring public

But as an analysis by Mike Antonucci at the 74Million, an education-policy publication, found: "After 11 months of school closures, we have a treasure trove of evidence of how they reacted to many and varied reopening plans. Even among the districts where schools eventually reopened, AFT unions offered more resistance than cooperation." In other words: "Weingarten's claim is the exact opposite of reality."

Recently, unions launched a public-relations campaign peddling the lie that teachers' unions had been advocates for school reopening all along.

The reality is that across the nation, in school districts where unions wield power, the same strategy was relentlessly pursued: Keep schools closed. In Miami, Antonucci notes, the teachers' union sued the state to stop the "reckless and unsafe reopening of schools." Their presi-

dent claimed, "Lives are going to be lost." Likewise, the president of the Broward Teachers Union asked, "What will you do when the deaths start happening?" Unions also sued to prevent school reopenings in Boston, and in cities such as Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., they organized "mental health" day mini-strikes and urged teachers not to return to the classroom.

Unionized teachers urged parents to refuse to return to in-person learning for the sake of...the teachers. "We sit endless hours, helping your children, and the community, every day, all day. We give up everything. And now you're asking us to risk our lives? That's too much," the Baltimore teachers' union president said.

In late May, as COVID cases and deaths declined precipitously, union leaders were still claiming that schools were unsafe. As the *Boston Globe* reported, "the head of Massachusetts' largest teachers union Friday called it 'premature' for the state to end all coronavirus-related protocols in schools this fall." Previewing what will no doubt be the union's summer narrative, she claimed officials "continually have failed to give proper deference to local situations, lower vaccination rates in communities of color, and the reluctance of parents there to send their children back to school full time in the fall."

In Northern Virginia, unions staged a protest featuring child-sized coffins; similar events in other school districts featured teachers dressed as death, complete with scythes and signs reading, "I can't wait to meet my kids." Teachers in Washington, D.C., piled fake body bags in front of the mayor's office to protest plans for reopening.

Recently, however, with vaccinations of eligible people rising to more than half of the American populace and the implicit end of the pandemic upon us, unions have shifted strategies. They launched a public-relations campaign peddling the lie that teachers' unions had been advocates for school reopening all along. Weingarten was the subject of flattering profiles in the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* about her supposed determination to ensure schools returned to normal, and she published an essay in the *Atlantic* that was little more than a glorified press release. The title of the piece, I kid you not, was: "Schools Must Open This Fall. In Person. Five Days a Week. The American Federation of Teachers, which I lead, is committed to making this happen." This is the same person who, months earlier, threatened nationwide teacher strikes and claimed that "nothing is off the table" when it comes to schools trying to plan for a Fall 2020 reopening.

Weingarten even told a reporter for the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that Jewish parents who wanted schools to reopen and were upset about union intransigence were "part of the ownership class" who "want to take that ladder of opportunity away from those who do not have it." This is a confounding statement coming from the person who leads a predominantly white union of middle-class workers whose success in preventing the reopening of public schools has disproportionately harmed nonwhite and disadvantaged children.

Truth to tell, these unions don't have much respect for parents. When Weingarten tweeted praise for Biden's bloated infrastructure plan in April, she noted, "115% of mothers with young children left their

jobs in 2020 because of childcare responsibilities” (the actual percentage was 11.5 percent). Left unmentioned by Weingarten is the fact that most of those women had to shoulder those responsibilities because schools remained closed. Equally tone-deaf was Vice President Kamala Harris, who literally cackled as she told an audience in March, “More parents are seeing the value of educators when they had to bring their kids and say we’re not paying them nearly enough!”

There is an unspoken social compact that working parents have with the public-school system—particularly working parents who can’t afford either private school alternatives. Their kids are in school all day; the adults go to work. This compact has been destroyed by the unions’ behavior during the pandemic.

As for the kids? Despite the fact that Weingarten claims in her Twitter bio that she is “fighting 4 kids,” a more accurate description would be that she uses children as rhetorical shields for efforts by the union to gain power for teachers—a strategy she’s clearly intent on pursuing into the fall.

Weingarten told MSNBC recently, “In the fall we have to first and foremost create a safe and welcoming environment.” In New York City, a United Federation of Teachers action group called MORE-UFT is intensifying the fear-mongering they engaged in this past school year. In a statement issued in late May, the group wrote, “The Mayor’s office and DOE leaders have made it clear that they intend to fill the schools with as many bodies as they can squeeze in, safety concerns or no.” They also insisted: “We also know that, contrary to repeated claims otherwise, schools contribute to community spread of Covid-19.”

This is a lie. In late May, a group of physicians, epidemiologists, and infectious-disease specialists wrote in the *Washington Post*, “As covid-19 cases continue to fall and vaccines demonstrate vigor against even the most concerning variants, it’s time to evaluate which pandemic restrictions are worth keeping in place.” Their first recommendation? “Children should return to their normal lives this summer and in the upcoming school year, without masks and regardless of their vaccination status. Overall, the risk to children is too low to justify the remaining restrictions they face.”

Despite such clear scientific evidence, in recent media appearances Weingarten has continued to demand masking, social-distancing requirements, caps on class sizes, and the necessity of allowing teachers who don’t want to teach in-person the option of

teaching virtually in the fall. Weingarten still engages in fear-mongering, claiming that any change in the guidance that relaxes such restrictions “portends a potential surge of the virus.” And she recently told the *Nation* that vaccines shouldn’t be mandatory for teachers: “Teachers should have the right to decide whether they want the vaccine or not.” So much for following the science.

ONE OF THE REASONS the collusion between the Biden administration and the unions is so harmful—and an inflection point in the story of our country’s response to the pandemic—is that school policymaking, both by convention and law, is largely a local affair. The federal Department of Education can create plenty of mischief, and has, but the real power rests with local school boards (or, in some cities, with the mayor).

That balance of power understandably changed during the pandemic. Federal policies regarding health and safety were treated as gospel, not guidance, by many schools. But when teachers’ unions put pressure on federal public-health officials to alter the guidelines to suit the unions’ goals—not to reflect the needs of children or the realities of the pandemic—it undermined that balance of power. In that sense, the unions effectively circumvented the way our school system is meant to function in our democracy, by taking power out of the hands of the people whose kids attend their local public school and placing it firmly in the hands of a special-interest group whose sole aim is to get more benefits for its members.

In states and school districts with powerful unions, the threat of strikes is unmatched by any equivalent power on the side of school officials (or

Teachers’ unions put pressure on federal public-health officials to alter the guidelines to suit the unions’ goals—not to reflect the realities of the pandemic.

parents). Thanks to collective-bargaining agreements negotiated by many unions, school officials are often legally barred from firing teachers. While Biden’s CDC was rewriting its guidance for schools, it didn’t get input from other stakeholders—parent groups, for example. Instead, it got input (and directives) from one of its biggest donors, whose main policy goal was keeping schools closed because teachers didn’t want to go back.

The end result of this union power grab is that many parents—often the most engaged and the most able to afford to do so—are voting with their feet to leave the public-school system.

Cities such as San Francisco have already seen significant enrollment declines. In early June, the school system reported that thousands of parents had fled the city's school system, prompting even the liberal *San Francisco Chronicle* to editorialize, "The missing thousands represent lost faith and lasting damage to public education institutions and unions that took advantage of an emergency to shirk their responsibility to the state's children."

In New York City, public-school enrollment numbers reveal a significant drop; as far back as January, Chalkbeat reported, "New York City's traditional public schools lost more students this year than the previous 14 years combined." Similar declines in enrollment are evident in Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Chicago, and Philadelphia—all places where teachers' unions succeeded in keeping public schools closed far longer than scientific evidence clearly showed was necessary.

Declining enrollment numbers mean less money for public schools since school budgets are based on the number of students enrolled at any given schools—which translates to decreased demand for teachers.

The unions' behavior has also had the unintended consequence of raising the political consciousness of many parents. Their experience battling unions and school boards during the past year has led them to see themselves as an interest group that needs to organize to protect their children's right to an education. Parents in California who were advocating for the reopening of their schools recently formed a nonprofit organization that aims to recruit school-board candidates. Parents in Fairfax County, Virginia, have also

analysis, these elections had an average of 2.9 candidates per seat. No seat went unopposed." There have also been a significant number of school board recall efforts across the country. As Sandra Davis, a parent in the Fairfax County school system, warned the county school board during a recent meeting, "you have triggered a bipartisan tidal wave of parental pushback."

Parents have filed lawsuits (and in some cases, won) over continued school closures across the country and have organized across social media. Randi Weingarten went on television in May to complain about these conflicts: "Teachers are tired; they are exhausted. We have to find a way to repair and nourish them as well as families in terms of attracting and retaining our teaching force.... It's not time to do the blame game." But parents are increasingly happy to assign blame where blame is due: on unions and the craven public officials who caved to their demands.

They have spent a year bearing witness to union hypocrisy, such as the Chicago teachers' union official who argued that it was unsafe for teachers to return to the classroom while posting images of herself poolside (and mask-less) in Puerto Rico on vacation, and the president of the Berkeley, California, teachers' union who has resisted reopening public schools but whose daughter has enjoyed full-time in-person education at a private school.

The narrative of teachers as heroes who are underpaid and undervalued and overworked is no longer viable except as a groveling talking point for politicians looking for support. Parents of school-age children have seen the reality. With the encouragement of their unions, far too many teachers overvalued themselves and underdelivered this year. They have no meaningful competition for their services,

and, as the year revealed, far too many of them have no meaningful commitment to acting like professionals. Whatever mild dislike of teachers' unions many Americans harbored, until recently their worst perceived sin was their support of incompetent teachers, perhaps with a

sprinkling of corruption. Today, they are viewed by an increasing number of Americans (across the political spectrum) as actively harmful.

In *Charter Schools and Their Enemies*, Thomas Sowell diagnosed the problem succinctly: "Much lofty rhetoric has been deployed by teachers unions in their public relations campaigns to promote their own interests, as if they were promoting the interests

Parents are increasingly happy to assign blame where blame is due: on teachers' unions and the craven public officials who caved to their demands.


organized a bipartisan group called the Fairfax County Parents Association, for the purpose of "empowering parents to advocate on behalf of their children."

As the *Christian Science Monitor* reported, while in most years many school-board officials run unopposed, "this year, almost two dozen of the country's largest school districts in five states have already had school-board elections, and according to a *Monitor*

of schoolchildren. But the late Albert Shanker, head of the United Federation of Teachers, was honest enough to state the plain fact: ‘When schoolchildren start paying union dues, that’s when I’ll start representing the interests of schoolchildren.’”

Weingarten’s messaging now is “Return. Recover. Reimagine,” and she’s been going around the country calling for a “renaissance” in public education—a renaissance that, coincidentally, would pour more money into her already bulging coffers. Why should we reward the people whose refusal to work for more than

a year contributed to the decline they now claim they can treat with their “renaissance”?

The purpose of the school system is to educate children, to serve children, to meet the needs of the nation’s children. Its purpose is not full employment for teachers, or administrators, or bureaucrats, or union bosses. A true renaissance in public education would require breaking the back of the unions that have done so much damage to that purpose. The scientifically incoherent, partisan, and morally reprehensible strategy they pursued should not be forgotten, nor forgiven. 



Politics & Ideas

Rhodes to Nowhere

*After the Fall: Being American
in the World We've Made*

BY BEN RHODES

Random House, 384 pages

Reviewed by JAMES KIRCHICK

HOW comforting it must be to see the world as does Ben Rhodes: Everyone who disagrees with him is either a fascist, an idiot, or both. According to Barack Obama's deputy national-security adviser for strategic communications, the presidency of Donald Trump amounted to "an American experiment with fascism." Contemplating

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a life beyond the maddening vicissitudes of politics, Rhodes abandons such an irresponsible notion when he realizes that, but for him, the deluge: "Perhaps this was how fascists got away with it through history." The Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, along with Republican congressional redistricting efforts and schemes "requiring certain forms of identification to register" to vote, come straight from Hungarian autocrat Viktor Orban's nationalist playbook of "Us versus Them politics." As for the unfortunate souls who find themselves opposing Rhodes in various legislative battles or ideological debates, he describes dealing with such people as akin to debating those who insist that "two plus two equals five" or, to cite a parable offered by a Chinese dissident regarding that country's rul-

ing Communist Party, who point at a deer and tell you it's a horse.

If you experienced the world like this, if you had convinced yourself that every single person who questioned your perspective on a wide variety of highly contentious issues was either arguing in bad faith or willfully malign, it would take a superhuman capacity *not* to be consumed by the "visceral, dumfounded anger" that appears to be the overriding factor in Rhodes's life. "Rage" is the word Rhodes uses most often to describe his feelings. It was "rage" that inspired Rhodes to get involved in politics, and rage that "kept me going day after day when all my other sources of motivation had dissipated or run up against the limits of an uncooperative world." Rage in response to "the daily realities of Trump's America" has "eaten away" at Rhodes over the past four

years. In the early weeks of the pandemic, Rhodes felt an “unutterable rage”—though not so unutterable as to prevent him from describing it, incessantly, in his new book, *After the Fall: Being American in the World We’ve Made*.

Five years ago, in a widely-read profile of Rhodes written by David Samuels for the *New York Times Magazine*, Obama’s United Nations ambassador Samantha Power remarked that the character from literature Rhodes most reminded her of was Holden Caulfield. In *After the Fall*, Rhodes makes every effort to live up to that reputation as an angry young man, petulantly scorning his many critics as phonies. And he adds a geopolitical dimension to the composite, writing with the self-righteousness of a college freshman heavily under the influence of Edward Said. Dumbstruck by Trump’s election, our narrator traipses around the world in an effort to find himself as much as the answers to how such a travesty could have happened. In Myanmar, Rhodes stares at a giant Buddha statue, while in Cuba, he reflects before the future gravesite of Raul Castro. He floats from airport business lounge to airport business lounge, addressing hedge-fund managers and investment bankers like a younger, angrier Bill Murray in *Lost in Translation*. What really interests Rhodes, however, are the insights he gathers from democratic activists in Hungary, Russia, and China, three former Communist countries facing the same toxic blend of nationalism and authoritarianism that Rhodes claims America confronted under the reign of Donald J. Trump.

If Rhodes encountered a single individual during these travels who disagreed with him, he leaves no record of it. The same goes for criticism from his interlocutors

about the policies of the administration he served. In his chapters on Russia, for instance, Rhodes manages to avoid any mention of the “reset” policy that was prelude to President Vladimir Putin’s annexation of the Crimean peninsula and ongoing invasion of Ukraine. Conspicuously absent from the “international community of underdogs” Rhodes interviews are any Syrians, whom Obama abandoned to the tender mercies of Bashar al-Assad after refusing to enforce his own red line against the dictator’s use of chemical weapons against his own people. Rhodes makes up for this elision with a chapter that essentially argues the case for the Middle East’s “axis of Resistance” (comprising Iran and its proxies) and bashes America’s traditional Sunni Arab allies, who along with Israel opposed the administration’s ill-fated nuclear deal with Tehran.

The most unintentionally valuable parts of *After the Fall* are its anecdotes. Less than a year after Obama accepted a humiliating Russian offer to “remove” Syria’s chemical weapons, the president attended a summit of world leaders in France commemorating the 70th anniversary of the D-Day invasion. Following the awkward performance of an interpretative dance routine reenacting the Second World War, Obama marvels to Rhodes at what Putin must have thought: “Man, the West has gotten soft.” The 44th president’s remarkable lack of self-awareness is matched only by that of his amanuensis, who apparently thinks it boosts his standing as a wordsmith to let the world know that he is the man responsible for coining the phrase, uttered by Obama during the 2008 election, “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.” Elsewhere, Rhodes informs us that, on the night of Trump’s

shock victory, he wrote an email to his boss stating that “history doesn’t move in a straight line, it zigs and zags,” which Obama, according to Rhodes, repeatedly told people reminded him of Ralph Ellison. (Presumably this insight struck our usually voluble narrator after the moment during Election Night when being asked for his reaction rendered him speechless for a full 30 seconds, a scene captured in the 2017 documentary *The Final Year*.)

Oddly for a man who prides himself on being such a nuanced thinker, Rhodes is thoroughly Manichean in his outlook. “From Trianon to the Tea Party” is the subtitle he chooses for a chapter likening Hungary’s ethnic nationalists (still obsessed with a century-old treaty dismembering the Hungarian empire) to the American anti-tax movement. The 2019 British general election, Rhodes writes, “swept the pro-Brexit conservatives into power, amplifying the nationalist trend that Orban represented,” a statement that manages to a) conflate two very different phenomena, b) omit the role played by the abominable Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, and c) misconstrue the fact that the UK Conservatives have been *in* power since 2010. While characterizing Republicans as “fascists,” Rhodes takes umbrage at their labeling Democrats “socialists.” One of the only times Rhodes attempts to empathize with a political adversary is in a brief disquisition on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Herewith, Rhodes attempting to be charitable, “try[ing] to see it from Netanyahu’s perspective”:

Given the way the Jews have been treated over the years, if Israel doesn’t act like all the other bad actors around the

world, the Jews will be screwed again. So, the thinking goes, we have to be corrupt, be nationalist, make deals with unpleasant people, take the Palestinians' land, attack and discredit opponents with lies or exaggerations, because that's what's required to defend a people who have suffered.

This, from a man who constantly ridicules the political tactics of *other* people as nothing more than a cynical game of "Us versus Them."

"War," a 13-year-old Rhodes wrote portentously in his diary on the eve of Operation Desert Storm, "War is upon us." The prose in *After the Fall* is all downhill from that bar mitzvah year. Like his former boss, Rhodes fancies himself a writer, an aspiration in the pursuit of which he obtained an MFA in creative writing. *After the Fall* is peppered with the unimaginative flourishes and pseudo-sophisticated musings of a failed novelist. Obsessively tracking his social-media feed, he is "like an addict being given tiny doses of an opioid by some giant unseen beast," which might qualify as the most overused simile of the past decade. A dingy Dupont Circle bar represents to Rhodes "a grand experiment in self-determination still unfolding." Moving to Los Angeles after the conclusion of the Obama administration "was a disorienting transition—sitting in cars, doing away with seasons, living in a place where the conversation rarely revolves around what's happening in the world and you've removed yourself from Washington's revolving door waiting room for future government service." Disorienting, perhaps, but not nearly so much as reading that sentence.

THE SUBTITLE of *After the Fall: Being American in the World We've Made* is

surely an implicit rebuke to Robert Kagan's 2012 *The World America Made*. Precisely when the Obama administration was retreating abroad, that slim volume offered a timely reminder of how America created the postwar liberal international order and made a vigorous case for the country to sustain it. According to Rhodes, however, the "world we've made" is not the one of unprecedented peace and prosperity depicted by Kagan, but rather a hellscape tarnished by environmental degradation, Orwellian tech companies, maimed and murdered civilians, a Middle East in flames, and triple-amputee veterans returning home from pointless wars.

"We are a country that killed hundreds of thousands of people through our own unique blend of incompetence and irrationality," Rhodes writes, and that's just his description of America's response to the coronavirus. In his embittered recitation of the standard left-wing litany of American crimes and transgressions, Rhodes sounds an awful lot like Bernie Sanders, with whose fundamental appraisal, Rhodes reveals, Obama essentially agreed. "The occasional hawkish language on terrorism" that appeared in the speeches Rhodes wrote for Obama, along with "the critiques of capitalism that had to be carefully worded to avoid charges of socialism," were "compromises to political reality." Rhodes echoes Obama and former Secretary of State John Kerry in his stupefaction at Putin's "nineteenth-century style of annexation of a neighbor's territory," a strange observation considering how much territory had been annexed in the 20th. China's gulag archipelago for Uighur Muslims, Rhodes writes, is simply a turbocharged version of Guantanamo Bay. Reflecting on the presidential

statement he wrote condemning the murder of another Russian liberal, Boris Nemtsov, Rhodes gets misty-eyed thinking about "the idea that if the world's most powerful government sounds the same notes again and again, year after year, the continuous melody would let people struggling for their rights feel less alone, so that the arc of history might bend in a different direction." He asks, "Wasn't that, in a way, how the Cold War had reached its peaceful end?"

Not really, no.

If Rhodes is befuddled as to how America won the first Cold War, he is much more clear-eyed about the imperatives of the next one. "The Cold War that needs to be won now is at home, a battle between people who live in the reality of the world as it is," the supercilious title of his White House memoir, "and people who are choosing to live in a false reality comprised of their basest grievances—and seeking to impose it on the rest of us." This contemptuous (and clunky) declaration on behalf of the reality-based community precedes a final chapter on the tumultuous events of 2020, in which Rhodes finds himself at a loss when his daughter asks why the National Guard has been deployed a block from their house in the aftermath of George Floyd's death. That would indeed be a difficult question to answer for a partisan of the side whose spokespeople insist that they inhabit "objective reality" while simultaneously asserting that the riots that erupted across the country last summer were a right-wing fiction, Donald Trump was a Russian agent, and the possible genesis of COVID-19 in a Chinese laboratory was a racist lie. The sheer hypocrisy of Them is more than sufficient to elicit a very utterable rage within Us. 🍷

Sohrab Ahmari Story Hour

***The Unbroken Thread:
Discovering the Wisdom of
Tradition in an Age of Chaos***

By SOHRAB AHMARI
Convergent Books, 320 pages

Reviewed by

MICHAEL BRENDAN DOUGHERTY

MANY OF those who have come to know Sohrab Ahmari over the past few years from his populist turn toward Donald Trump and his assaults on the establishment conservative movement—a turn he took after working for COMMENTARY and upon joining the *New York Post* as its op-ed editor—have done so in the course of the day-to-day controversies on social media in which he has become a peculiarly acerbic presence. Those Ahmari fans will surely be surprised by his new book, *The Unbroken Thread*, a triumph of intellectual hagiography that leads the reader confidently into deep waters.

Its chapters are structured around the life stories, intellectual journeys, and spiritual trials of a variety of protagonists. Many of them become Christians, such as Augustine of Hippo, or the 20th-century anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner. But Ahmari also draws on Confucius and even the feminist radical Andrea Dwor-

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kin. In some ways, *The Unbroken Thread* is Ahmari's sequel to his 2018 memoir of immigration and conversion, *From Fire, by Water*. That book traced Ahmari's life journey across the world and a series of worldviews—a life story that exists in a paradoxical tension with the message of *The Unbroken Thread*.

Throughout his memoir, a change of location or profession leads almost immediately to a shift in worldview, in which Ahmari always places himself in conflict with his surroundings. *From Fire, by Water* begins with a childhood in revolutionary Iran. Ahmari found it backward and censorious. He sought out even the slightest hint of liberation from his native theocracy. Memorably, he smells liberation in the suitcases his grandparents brought back from their trips beyond Iran. Just a whiff of a department store called Ahmari away from the scent of stale rosewater and sand at home. He yearned for the adventure and freshness he saw portrayed in movies like *Star Wars*.

Then in adolescence he found himself transplanted to Utah. There he becomes dissatisfied with the climate of do-gooding cheerfulness and slight clannishness of the Mormon world. He turns to atheism and Communism. He joins Teach for America, and there he becomes a neoconservative. He goes to modern London and writes for the *Wall Street Journal*, and in the one Western European nation with an Established Church, he joins the minority Catholic faith. By the time he finished *From Fire*,

by *Water*, Ahmari was hanging a portrait of St. John Paul II above his desk at a leading journal of Jewish conservatism, this very magazine in your hands.

In *The Unbroken Thread*, the new place Ahmari now occupies is existential: He has become the father of two. And it is fatherly concern that effected his most recent transformation into a public controversialist. Living in the center of Manhattan, Ahmari came across an example of the kind of cultural formation that some of the upwardly mobile, educated urbanites in America are providing to their children: an ad for Drag Queen Story Hour at a library in California. This kind of event has been popping up across America. You know what it is just from the name itself: A cross-dressing man vamps around at the public library, reading a children's book while also telling, to the parents mostly, the kind of stale double-entendre jokes that are a normal feature of a drag show.

Drag Queen Story Hour is, I think, staged not for the edification of the young, but for the elevation of the cross-dresser or the transgendered performers. Their behavior isn't just the sort of thing that makes for a bawdy lark at a nightclub; no, it's educational, even uplifting. By making an audience for you of our children, we've proved we accept you. Look how open-minded we are.

Ahmari focused his ire over Drag Queen Story Hour on a seemingly unlikely target: David French, the conservative evangelical, lawyer, and free-speech activist who was then my colleague at *National Review*. French was, in Ahmari's telling, an avatar of a conservatism that had compromised too much with philosophical liberalism and was therefore unwilling to use authority in the public square on behalf of the good.

For Ahmari, the liberal conservatism of David French is a form of unilateral disarmament, the abandonment of our posts. It also leads to an unfavorable asymmetry in America's culture war. Progressives hate racism, believing it corrupts young minds and warps society. And so they seek every means of extirpating it, through federal statute, social stigma, and the implementation of anti-racist education at schools. But in Ahmari's view, when liberal conservatives come upon Drag Queen Story Hour, which in their heart of hearts they too believe corrupts youth, they throw up their hands, mumble something about separation of powers and the blessings of liberty, and call it a day, before cashing their checks from a conservative nonprofit.

The introduction gets into Ahmari's fears that the "American order enshrines very few substantive ideals I would want to transmit to my son." He envisions himself and his wife meeting their adult son, who has become a "winner" at life, just back from Davos, thinking of joining a big firm and getting a bit more out of his workouts. Ahmari would at once feel proud and ashamed. Most parents would not even notice if their son listened to TED Talks for life hacks and tips on productivity. But for Ahmari, this is a nightmare worth avoiding. And this is why he named his boy after Maximilian Kolbe—a Polish priest who died in Block 11 of the Auschwitz death camp, having volunteered to take the place of a father selected to be executed in an act of collective punishment. Kolbe's last gesture was to raise his arm willingly to the needle bearing the carbolic acid that euthanized him.

So Ahmari's book is a statement of the most vertiginously counter-cultural conviction of all. The gesture of this name and the book

itself are like the legend of Blanche of Castile, the 13th-century queen who reputedly told her son, Louis, "I love you, my dear son, as much as a mother can love her child; but I would rather see you dead at my feet than that you should ever commit a mortal sin." Her son, the king after whom St. Louis is named, would be known for his personal devotion, his association with beggars and lepers, as well as his expansion of the Crusade against the Cathars in France, and the imposition of mutilation of the tongue as a punishment for blasphemy.

THE BOOK'S 12 essays are elegantly written and tend to get stronger as the book goes on. One of the best is "Should You Think for Yourself?" It tells the story of the debate between Prime Minister William Gladstone, a 19th-century liberal par excellence, and England's most famous Catholic convert, Cardinal John Henry Newman. In response to the first Vatican Council's definition of papal infallibility, Gladstone wrote a blistering pamphlet charging the Roman Church with thieving the civil and moral freedom of Catholics, "stifling conscience and conviction." For Gladstone, the conscience had to be free of such prior claims of authority in order to apprehend for itself moral and religious truths. The aged Newman's task was to show, according to Ahmari, "that absolute freedom of thought of the kind advocated by Gladstone and other leading liberals was an illusion—and a pernicious one at that."

Newman proceeded by divining the duty of men to submit to the divine law—the standard of right conduct that is a part of human nature, the law written on man's hearts. The conscience is "the mental agent of the law that gauges our conduct according to

the law's standard and tries to get us to comply with its precepts." Newman's countercharge was that Gladstone's vision of freedom tended to vitiate the human conscience, licensing men to ignore the obligations and restraints that are against their self-interest. For Ahmari, the genius of the pre-moderns evoked by Newman was to recognize that, like the mother correcting her child, authority helps to tutor and form the conscience. A "firm, dynamic alliance between conscience and authority" forms "a bulwark against unjust power, including power over the mind."

For me, Ahmari's book is at its best when he tells the story of Hans Jonas, the German-born American Jewish philosopher and contemporary of Hannah Arendt's at the University of Marburg. Jonas became a student of the existential philosopher Martin Heidegger and the modernist Scripture scholar Rudolf Bultmann. A simple homework assignment led him to become a pioneering scholar of the ancient Christian heresy of Gnosticism, which contradicted the orthodox faith on many points, but most hotly on the goodness of Creation itself. In this, Jonas spied a spiritual precursor to Heidegger's own existentialism, which placed the human will at odds with the limitations of human existence. Across the variety of Gnostic cults Jonas found the same spiritual impulse, a "revolt against the world and its god in the name of an absolute spiritual freedom."

Jonas, a proud but nonobservant Jew, was at this time coming to detest the rising anti-Semitism of Germany. In 1933, he emigrated and vowed to return only as part of a conquering army. This was a vow he kept. In that same year, Heidegger joined the Nazi Party. Ahmari traces how, after the war, Jonas finally connected the world-

picture of Gnostics and existentialists to the moral vacuum of Nazi Germany. The longing to let an inner authentic spirit express itself fully, even against the constraints of the created world, led to the disdain not just of social convention but of human morality altogether. Heidegger's emphases on "*willing* and *becoming*" left him unanchored in reality and ultimately unable to resist the murderous tide of the time.

HAVING RECENTLY published a book that, like *The Unbroken Thread*, sought to uncover a demanding cultural inheritance I felt was in danger of being lost before my children could receive it, I'm risking the wrath of the gods and my peers by raising objections to a co-religionist doing the same. But I must. In a chapter asking, "Does God Need Politics?" Ahmari writes,

We thus come to perhaps the biggest question that diverts modernity from the great stream of traditional thought. Moderns, from celebrated philosophers to ordinary people across the political spectrum, are certain that religion and politics don't, and shouldn't, mix. Since we can't agree on the highest end or ultimate meaning of human life, their thinking runs, politics must be "neutral" ground, where citizens can vie over questions of "secular" public policy without God's sticking his nose into how much taxes the wealthy pay, how we treat immigrants and refugees, how we organize health care, and so on. Spiritual concerns thus belong to a private sphere: Each citizen can hold fast to her own private account of ultimate meaning—including, crucially, the belief that life has no meaning at all.

Ahmari is right that there are constitutional hurdles and common prejudices against some religious ideas—and that there are double standards here. The unprovable metaphysics behind egalitarianism may reign in politics, but the reason an anti-abortion argument fails to triumph is that it is associated with religious citizens. This rankles the same way that it rankled Newman when Gladstone preached a free conscience but also endorsed some forms of censorship as salutary. From John Locke's second treatise proposing that human existence begins with us as a "blank slate" to Anthony Kennedy's rulings about the sweet mystery of life, there is a void of meaning.

But the overall picture he paints of God and spirituality vacuumed out of political debate I think is simply not correct. To take one example, the legal changes in marriage and the attempt to raise the esteem of unusual sexualities in law was preceded by religious bodies—particularly the Mainline Protestant bodies—effecting these alterations in their theology. The advocates for these changes may occasionally try to undermine the confidence and standing of their religious opponents, but they try to clothe their claims in the Christian moral imperative to love, to show reciprocity, and not to judge hastily. Their desire to censor us is in some ways their inheritance of King Louis's determination to mutilate the tongue of blasphemers.

Liberals—even atheist progressives—are not shy about testing Christians and conservatives for their fidelity to God in their politics. Sometimes this is done cynically, but often it is a genuine curiosity or bafflement: *Jesus was clearly on the side of the poor, so why are you so often on the side of Wall Street?*

And where Ahmari sees the dis-

sipation of all authority in a cacophony of individual egoisms unable to coerce for the common good, I see a public square that is overflowing with such efforts, with contrasting claims of authority, meaning, and demands for cohesion, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The idea that private consciences can simply reject capital-S Science, or the moral duty to be masked or vaccinated, was utterly rejected by progressives.

Like Ahmari, I worry for my children. And I realize now my own book may have betrayed me as much as this one does its author. Our worries appear to others like an unresolved tension in the father projected onto the son. Mine was guilt for not honoring my mother enough during her life. Ahmari's is a conflict with his own story and his own ambition.

God has led the author from Iran through Utah and London and half a dozen worldviews in a rather short time. Almost any effort to bind our society with the unbroken thread he describes here would have made the author's journey to his current life circumstances entirely impossible. Like Ahmari, I suspect his son will be capable of being at Davos or its equivalent someday. And even if he appears to his father to be too interested in his career, God may even then be calling young Max to do some hidden work there, even if it is just consoling one of his peers. If Ahmari's exhortation of the unbroken thread of our duties as humans is to be bearable, it must be wound with another, a mature faith in Providence. It is that image G.K. Chesterton gave us in his Father Brown books—the image of that "unseen hook and an invisible line which is long enough to let him wander to the ends of the world and still to bring him back with a twitch upon the thread." 🍷

The Spy Who Went into the Cold

A Drop of Treason: Philip Agee and His Exposure of the CIA

BY JONATHAN STEVENSON
University of Chicago Press,
328 pages

Reviewed by ELI LAKE

JONATHAN Stevenson's biography of the turncoat CIA officer Philip Agee leaves the reader with an unexpected appreciation for the durability of the republic. One finishes his fine book thinking it was something of a miracle that America survived the 1970s and ultimately won the Cold War. The Agee controversy was just a single data point during a decade that began with the shootings at Kent State and ended with the Iranian hostage crisis and the Soviet capture of Afghanistan. But his story illustrates the moral exhaustion of post-Watergate and pre-Reagan America.

Agee is best known for his 1975 book, *Inside the Company*, a memoir of his tour as a spy in Latin America. The CIA, Agee says, were the bad guys, and he offers a harrowing portrayal of how the Cold War was fought in the shadows. Agee claims in the book that he overheard a man being tortured as he briefed a security chief in Uruguay about an insurgency in

his country. He writes about how he arranged for death squads to be trained in Panama. He says he put his own dog in a coma to test a knockout drug he would later use to subdue guard dogs at a foreign embassy.

Agee was not the first CIA man to write a critical memoir, but he was the first to publish the identities of the agency's assets, agents, and fellow officers he had once promised to protect. This was an act so treacherous that nearly 40 years after Agee's disclosures, former NSA contractor Edward Snowden went out of his way to explain why none of the material he handed to journalists would compromise the cover of agents in the field—why, in other words, he was not Philip Agee.

If Agee had just said his piece and moved on, his story would have been a black eye for the CIA. But he actually switched sides. He didn't seek the reform of the CIA; he sought its destruction. After his book, he helped found a publication, *Covert Action Information Bulletin*, which would go on to publicize the identities of "some 2,000 CIA officers, agents and other assets," according to Stevenson. He would later co-author two more books dedicated to identifying CIA officers and agents in Europe and Africa.

These days the word "traitor" is thrown around too casually. But Agee's actions in the late 1970s really do fit the constitutional definition of treason. First, he was giving aid and comfort to America's enemies in the middle of a Cold

War against international Communism, and he endangered the lives of Americans and foreigners who were fighting it. Second, Stevenson demonstrates that while it's probably untrue that Agee was actively an agent of Cuban intelligence, he clearly was their asset, willing to help them when he could and also drawing on their assistance.

Agee committed his crimes with a brazen flair as well. He taunted the CIA, acknowledging that he spent months in Cuba to do "research" for his book. He traveled to Moscow, allegedly to negotiate the rights to the Russian edition of his book. He corresponded with Weather Underground felon Kathy Boudin and offered to testify on behalf of Red Army Faction terrorist Ulrike Meinhof at her trial. In this respect, Agee was a sinister version of the character played by the late Charles Grodin in the movie *Midnight Run*—a former mob accountant who would occasionally send postcards to the Mafia boss about how he was spending the money he had stolen from him.

In 1976, for example, Agee flew to Jamaica to give a press conference, on the eve of national elections, outing nine alleged CIA officers operating out of the U.S. Embassy in Kingston. "He aimed to strip the agency bare," Stevenson writes. During the press conference, he not only provided their names, he also disclosed their home addresses and telephone numbers. In the magazine *Counterspy*, he published a photo and name of the CIA's top liaison with British intelligence, leading the UK government to deport him. After Iranian fanatics seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979, Agee publicly and privately offered the hostage-takers his services to negotiate their release in exchange for all U.S. files on CIA activities in

Iran under Shah Reza Pahlavi.

These stunts should have made Agee toxic to the respectable international left. But this was not the case. Gabriel Garcia Marquez, then the leading writer in Latin America, invited him to testify in a mock war-crimes tribunal on political repression. Jean-Paul Sartre published an essay by Agee in his publication *Les Temps Modernes*.

After proceedings began in the United Kingdom that ultimately led to Agee's expulsion from that country in 1977, 150 members of Parliament signed a motion of protest, including future foreign secretary Robin Cook. The mother of chess champion Bobby Fischer staged a 10-day hunger strike in front of Whitehall. Morton Halperin, once an aide to Henry Kissinger and later a founder of the George Soros-funded Open Society Institute, made an impassioned plea on Agee's behalf at Central Hall, Westminster. (Halperin would later lose his nomination battle to join the Clinton administration in part because of his Agee advocacy.) Decades later, former California Governor Jerry Brown and former President Jimmy Carter would use Agee's Havana-based travel agency for visits to Cuba. Carter's visit was particularly ironic since his administration had revoked Agee's U.S. passport in 1979.

THE KEY to understanding why the left never shunned Agee or acknowledged his traitorousness was timing. His disclosures came at a boiling point for American security-state scandals. These include the publication of a top-secret history of U.S. policy in Vietnam, known as the Pentagon Papers; a series of articles by Seymour Hersh that revealed CIA assassination plots; and the exposure by radical anti-war groups of files that showed the extent of

 The key to understanding why the left never shunned the turncoat CIA officer Philip Agee or acknowledged his being a traitor was timing. His disclosures came at a boiling point for U.S. security-state scandals.

illicit domestic spying by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI. All this led Congress to establish two committees in 1975 that put on the public record a history of CIA and FBI overreach that nearly wrecked both agencies.

Timing also explains the tepid response from the U.S. government to his treason. While the FBI conducted two separate investigations in the 1990s against Agee for betraying his country, the Justice Department never brought these cases. In 1975, Attorney General Edward Levi drafted a memo detailing how Agee could be prosecuted for violating his secrecy agreement with the CIA, but he advised against such a prosecution because it would entail the disclosure of still more state secrets. At the time, the CIA was already under enormous scrutiny, and legal action against a turncoat would invite more of it.

Stevenson, a National Security Council official during the Obama

administration and a fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, provides a thorough account of the CIA's strategy to neutralize Agee, which was successful at first. Three years before the publication of *Inside the Company*, the CIA sent two officers to Agee, then in Paris, to befriend him. Posing as a left-wing journalist and a Venezuelan heiress, the spies gave Agee a bugged typewriter and were able to obtain a draft of the memoir. An internal CIA review found that Agee would disclose "the true status of over 400 CIA officers, collaborators, agents, informants, and fronts," Stevenson writes. This gave the agency a head start in mitigating the pending damage.

By the time the book was published, the CIA had switched to trying to blacken his reputation in the press. The point man for this operation was the CIA's recently retired chief of Western Hemisphere operations, David Atlee Phillips. It was Phillips who first leveled the charge that Agee had been directly responsible for the murder of the CIA station chief in Athens, Richard Welch.

This charge has long outlived Agee, who died in 2008, but Stevenson persuasively argues that Agee's writings did not, in fact, lead a group of revolutionaries to murder Welch and his wife in December 1975. To start with, Agee never named Welch in his book, while Welch's name did appear in the 1969 and 1973 State Department Biographic Register. Using methods outlined in a 1974 *Washington Monthly* article on how to identify CIA officers at foreign embassies, *Counterspy* outed Welch in 1975 as the former station chief in Lima, Peru. But it was a newspaper in Athens that identified Welch as the new station chief.

The more likely cause of Welch's murder was poor operational secu-


rity. Stevenson writes that former CIA Director William Colby eventually told the *Los Angeles Times* that Welch had “bad cover” and was living in the same house as his predecessor, whom the assassins had previously stalked. Eventually even Phillips acknowledged that there was no direct link between Agee and the murder of Welch.

But Agee’s innocence in this one case obscures the larger point about the damage he did. The fact that no one was killed because of his disclosures was only a fortunate accident. “Agee’s revelations easily could have resulted in the assassination of a CIA officer,” Stevenson writes. “And it’s arguably a matter of luck that they didn’t.” He did destroy careers and intelligence networks. For a few years, he helped create a new genre of journalism dedicated to outing the identities of CIA officers. This made the basic work of recruiting and managing spies much harder.

Over time, Agee mellowed. He agreed in principle in 1980 to submit his writings to a CIA pre-publication board, which reviews the work of all former employees, and appears to have largely stuck by it. After the 1970s, he spent the rest of his life trying his best to be a radical intellectual. First living in West Germany and then moving to an apartment in Cuba, Agee became a dime-store Howard Zinn, occasionally publishing op-eds in the *Guardian*, consulting on documentaries and films and barely scraping by on commissions, lecture fees, and an untenured teaching gig at a German university. He died in a Cuban hospital after ulcers in his intestine ruptured, leaving his wife with tens of thousands of dollars in debt and a failed Cuban travel agency. Stevenson records that some of his last words were, “No one can say I didn’t make a difference.”

That is true in a sense. Agee weakened the CIA at a moment

when the threat of international Communism was rising. If he had been a Soviet spy, waging a political war against the KGB, it’s doubtful he would have lived to publish a memoir. But Philip Agee had the

good fortune of being an American traitor. The final pathetic decades of his life are a reminder of not only America’s moral superiority to its adversary in the Cold War, but also of its resilience. 

Defining Espionage Down

*Ethel Rosenberg:
An American Tragedy*

BY ANNE SEBBA
St. Martin’s Press, 306 pages

Reviewed by RONALD RADOSH

ANNE SEBBA has just published the third biography of Ethel Rosenberg, who was executed in 1953 along with her husband Julius for conspiracy to commit espionage against the United States on behalf of the Soviet Union. Virginia Gardner, a Communist activist, wrote the first during the frenzied public campaign to save the lives of Ethel and Julius. The second came in 1998, from Ilene Philipson. The question one must ask is whether a new biography is even necessary and what new information the author brings to the table.

Sebba’s narrative revolves around one question central to any author

who takes up the Rosenberg case: Was Ethel guilty as charged, or innocent as she claimed to be? Sebba, a Briton and author of a previous biography of Wallis Simpson, the Dutchess of Windsor, tells us from the start that although Ethel was a member of the Communist Party, she “was not, I believe, a spy.” She acknowledges that Ethel was hardly a saint, was committed to the cause, and was “fiercely loyal to her beloved husband, who undoubtedly was a Communist spy, passing military secrets to the Soviet Union during World War II.” But if she had been guilty and had participated with Julius in spying for Stalin’s Soviet Union, why would she refuse to cooperate with the government once caught? Why did she continue to claim innocence when she knew that her passing and that of her husband would not only orphan their two children, Michael and Robert, but mire them in a lifetime of pain?

Sebba fully acknowledges Communism’s horrors and quotes many observers who point out how Communists abandoned use of their own minds, giving up their auton-


RONALD RADOSH is co-author, with Joyce Milton, of *The Rosenberg File*. He has written widely about Soviet espionage and Communism.

my to follow the Party's dictates and policies blindly. But she says Ethel's guilt or innocence is beside the point. For her, the real story is not Ethel's betrayal of her country, but her brother's and mother's unwillingness to go along with her cover-up. Her brother, David Greenglass, became the main witness against his sister, and their mother stood with David and pleaded with Ethel to adopt the path he had chosen.

ETHEL ROSENBERG'S life experience was not dissimilar to that of many first- and second-generation Jewish immigrants who settled in New York City's Lower East Side in the early years of the 20th century. As a group, these Jews started out at or near the bottom. Ethel, Sebba writes, lived in a "cold-water tenement house" that faced a stable housing "horses that pulled delivery carts around the cobbled streets of the neighborhood." The area "reeked of filth and excrement."

Undoubtedly, these harsh conditions made Ethel and her future husband susceptible to the overtures from the radical left. What made Ethel a bit different was a taste for the arts. She attended Seward Park High School, whose graduates included Zero Mostel, Tony Curtis, and Walter Matthau. She loved classical music and drama, and her greatest desire, a friend of hers told Sebba, was "never having to live like her mother, forever going about the streets with a big shopping bag searching for bargains." She sang in a trio with friends and was good enough to join the Schola Cantorum, New York City's preeminent chorus. It performed often in Carnegie Hall and at the Metropolitan Opera House, and its guest conductors included Arturo Toscanini and Otto Klemperer.

Ethel was forced to abandon this burgeoning career when Ju-

 Ethel was precisely the kind of Communist who, like her husband, would have gladly gone along if they were given the honor of being asked to engage in 'special work'—the euphemism for helping the Soviet Union by becoming a spy.

lius's various attempts at starting a business and finding permanent work proved to be failures. The section head of the CP for the neighborhood was Carl Marzani, who was (we learned decades later) on the Soviet payroll. He ran a front created by the American Communist Party called The Defense Council and hired Ethel—whom he described as a "cheerful, housewife type"—as his secretary.

Her small salary kept the two afloat. It was not until April 1942, when Julius became an inspector engineer and got a higher salary, that they were able to move to a high-rise apartment in Knickerbocker Village, a federal housing project whose apartments had heat and a bathroom.

Sebba writes about Ethel's strong work ethic, her commitment to activities demanded by party activists, and, after she had children,

her constant attempts to keep up with child-rearing theories once it became clear that her first-born Michael was a demanding and difficult child. She was a loving and loyal wife to Julius, and their bond held firm even after they were arrested and indicted in late July 1950.

Sebba writes that Ethel ended her life an "international icon." She survived three years in prison, two in solitary confinement, and yet showed "unassailable dignity and belief that the cause for which she prepared to give her life was indeed a worthy one." But many readers will wonder why Ethel preferred to stay loyal to her guilty husband and shout loud and clear that she and Julius were both totally innocent when she had two small children whose lives would be forever cast in the shadow of their parents' death by electrocution.

The answer comes near the end of Sebba's book, when she recounts an interview with Ethel's friend Miriam Moskowitz, who got to know Ethel in prison when she herself was found guilty of obstruction of justice in an associated case. Moskowitz explains to Sebba that Ethel was "doctrinaire" and a "good soldier" in the Communist movement who "always followed the party line uncritically, unquestionably and aggressively." She not only followed the party line, Moskowitz recalls, but "argued for it and justified it with a lot of voluminous verbosity," a woman who was "totally uncritical."

In other words, Ethel was precisely the kind of Communist who, like her husband, would have gladly gone along if they were given the honor by the party of being asked to engage in "special work"—the euphemism employed by the comrades for helping the Soviet Union by becoming a spy.

Sebba downplays what Ethel did, while acknowledging that she

was too close to Julius not to have fully known the extent of his espionage work. She understands that in a conspiracy indictment, Ethel was technically guilty just by knowing what was going on and remaining silent, but argues Ethel was not involved. Though legally, then, she was “complicit to a conspiracy,” Sebba asks: “Was that...alone a crime punishable by death?”

Ethel knew of her husband’s work as a spy, as Sebba says. She helped the KGB recruit members in the United States and identified potential people to recruit. She participated in critical meetings in which her husband was present and a conversation was held about how to get her brother, David, to be recruited as a spy at Los Alamos, where he worked as a mechanical engineer on the detonator that would be used on the first atomic bomb. Indeed, Ethel was the one who urged David’s wife, Ruth, to act quickly to recruit him, and she earlier had suggested that Ruth be made part of the network.

We know all this from the Venona decrypts, a voluminous collection of the KGB’s Moscow Center correspondence with its agents in the United States. The Venona documents were released in 1995. And when it comes to the revelations from Venona, Sebba engages in particularly disingenuous rationales to minimize Ethel’s activity by arguing that the Venona papers are hardly conclusive. In fact, they reveal the Moscow Center’s deep interest in Ethel as well as Julius.

For example, one such KGB message reveals that “in view of delicate health [Ethel] does not work.” Sebba claims that “it could have referred to espionage work or...trying to earn a living in a paid job.” Another reads: “LIBERAL [Julius’s code name] and his wife recommend her [David’s wife, Ruth Greenglass] as an intelligent

and clever girl.” Sebba thinks that this passage is “open to different interpretations, depending on the reader’s preexisting attitude to the Cold War.”

What on earth could these differing interpretations be? Sebba first turns to the work of two writers and experts on Soviet espionage, Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, and notes they believe that the passage means “Ethel was fully aware of her husband’s espionage work” and “assisted in recruiting her brother and sister-in-law.”

Then she moves on to the claims of a Canadian named Bernice Schrank, who argues in a 2002 history journal that the cable may simply have meant “Julius met with the Russians and told them that he...agreed that his sister-in-law was ‘an intelligent and clever girl.’” Otherwise, Schrank says, the cable “does not prove that Ethel recruited Ruth” and is only “vague and suggestive.”

HOW TO CHOOSE between these two interpretations? It’s not difficult, actually. Klehr, professor emeritus at Emory University, and Haynes, who worked for decades at the Library of Congress, are celebrated scholars whose primary fields of study are American Communism and Soviet espionage. They have published many books on the subject (as well as articles in COMMENTARY). Sebba’s preferred voice, Bernice Schrank, is a retired professor of literature who has written a “research and production source-book” on the Irish playwright Sean O’Casey and edited another book on Irish authors and one on folklore and literature in Ireland and Newfoundland. According to Schrank, the Venona decrypts show that “Julius Rosenberg was “not necessarily [involved] in espionage” but rather in “unau-

thorized technological transfer” of information to the Soviets. That is ludicrous and comical. Even the Meeropols, the children of Julius and Ethel, acknowledge that their father was an active Soviet spy.

Sebba writes that Ethel remains “irresistible as a tragic figure,” one who “continues to defy labeling as mother, wife, sister, daughter, Communist, or would-be opera singer” and who has “penetrated the American consciousness deeply.” Sebba hails Ethel’s determination “to make something valuable of her life according to her own moral standards” with an “extraordinary single-mindedness.” In doing so, Sebba echoes a compatriot of Ethel, who told her that “she died for the cause, but the cause was that they were not going to give other names.” That meant to Ethel “not ratting on others and supporting her husband.”

The other names were not those of political dissenters but of Communists who had agreed to join Julius’s network and spy for Joseph Stalin. Yet Sebba writes: “It is in this light it is possible to understand Ethel’s final words” to her sons. “Always remember we were innocent,” she said. This stance, Sebba believes, made Ethel “a profoundly moral woman” because she “betrayed no one.”

Sebba’s conclusion reflects a dreadful naiveté about how Communist ideology can distort the very meaning of moral standards. Ethel lived by a moral code according to which one’s evident betrayal of one’s own country is to be discounted, and in which it is a braver choice to orphan your own sons than to betray your husband and the extremist totalitarian movement you both cherished—and that did the world unimaginable harm. Ethel Rosenberg was not a martyr. She was, at best, knowingly complicit in a world-historical evil. 🍷

The Man Who (Re)made Sinatra

The Riddle of Nelson

By TERRY TEACHOUT

NELSON Riddle, who was born 100 years ago, is the only one of the song arrangers of the postwar era who is still widely known by name—and that is because of a fluke. In 1983, he recorded the first of three albums on which Linda Ronstadt sang standards backed by his arrangements, and he received credit on the album covers for his participation. Riddle, who had been shunted into semi-obscurity by the rise of rock, found himself suddenly famous. Ronstadt's albums sold 7 million copies and introduced him to a new generation of listeners.

What do arrangers do? When working with pop singers, they take songs originally written and published for voice and piano and turn their piano parts into full-blown orchestral scores, adding

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instrumental introductions, new underscoring, and (sometimes) interludes of their own devising, all of which may or may not be derived from the original song's melody and harmonies. Few arrangers write their own songs, just as it is extremely unusual for songwriters to make their own arrangements, or even to approve an arrangement by someone else: Both are specialists, and the skill sets involved are very different.

Riddle was, perhaps, the greatest of all the arrangers who worked on the Great American Songbook, primarily because of the work he did in the 1950s with Frank Sinatra. The two men were brought together by Capitol Records in 1953 in the hope of updating Sinatra's singing style, which still recalled his youthful crooning of sentimental ballads. Within a matter of years, Sinatra had recorded his two finest albums, *Songs for Swingin' Lovers!* (1956) and *Frank Sinatra Sings for Only the Lonely* (1958), on which he emerged decisively as a mature artist, in part because of Riddle's sympathetic backing. Riddle also wrote arrangements of like quality for Rosemary Clooney, Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, Judy Garland, Antônio Carlos Jobim, Peggy Lee, and Dean Martin. Riddle's innovative work defined the predominant postwar style of arranging, which may be the defining sound of the American century. Such an artistic

force is deserving of a first-class full-length biography. Alas, Peter Levinson's *September in the Rain* (2001), though full of illuminating detail about his life, is musically uninformed, while Geoffrey Littlefield's newly published *Nelson Riddle: Music with a Heartbeat*, nominally co-written with Riddle's son Christopher, is a vanity-press disaster, besmirched by factual errors and even more musically ignorant than Levinson's book.* Still, *September in the Rain* does let us see how Riddle developed as an artist, in the process enriching our understanding of the life of the chronically melancholy man and his uncomfortable relationship with the greatest popular singer of the 20th century.

BORN IN New Jersey, Riddle became obsessed with music as a boy. While early encounters with Ravel's *Boléro* and Debussy's "Reflets dans l'eau" gave him a lasting passion for the complex harmonies of the French impressionists, he decided that he wanted instead to write for the big bands of the day. He studied with Bill Finegan, a classically trained composer-arranger who had worked with Glenn Miller. And after serving in World War II, Riddle moved to Los Angeles and set up shop. He took instruction from the classical composer Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, whose other pupils included future movie-music giants Jerry Goldsmith, Henry Mancini, and John Williams. In 1950, Riddle wrote the string chart for Nat King Cole's "Mona Lisa," and the record's success not only launched a lasting musical partnership, but also led to Riddle's becoming music director de facto for Capitol.

Shortly afterward, Riddle met Sinatra, whose singing career was on the rocks when Capitol signed


* Grosvenor House, 226 pages.

him in 1953. Sinatra was musically galvanized by the encounter. The Riddle style, which was not quite fully formed when he arranged “Mona Lisa,” had by then matured into one of the most recognizable sounds of the ’50s (so much so that Billy May, one of Sinatra’s other arrangers, parodied it in a clever 1959 musical spoof called “Solving the Riddle”). It was ideally suited to the purpose of making Sinatra known to listeners too young to have known him as the skinny balladeer of the ’40s on whom their mothers had doted, and the two men started working together regularly at once.

Prior to writing an arrangement for Sinatra, Riddle would consult closely with the singer on its overall shape. Then he started writing, following a three-step formula that he described in an interview: “First, find the peak of the song and build the whole arrangement to that peak, pacing itself as [Sinatra] paces himself vocally. Second, when he’s moving, get the hell out of the way. When he’s doing nothing, move in fast and establish something...build about two-thirds of the way through, and then fade to a surprise ending.”

These steps can all be heard in the version of Cole Porter’s “I’ve Got You Under My Skin” on *Songs for Swingin’ Lovers!* It is played by a 34-piece studio orchestra larger than and significantly different in instrumentation from the 16-piece big bands of the Swing Era. Not only do all five saxophonists double on flute or clarinet, but the seven-man brass section is augmented by a bass trombone, one of Riddle’s favorite instruments, and there is also a small string section (three violins, two violas, and three cellos).

Riddle kicks off the song with an unexpectedly asymmetrical six-bar introduction (four- and eight-bar

 Riddle scored torch songs with the same airy transparency that he brought to swinging numbers. This lightness of touch, which was his trademark, allowed Frank Sinatra to plumb the depths of despair without spilling over into lugubriousness.

intros are more common) in which clarinets, flutes, and muted trombones toss riffs back and forth, with off-beat chordal punctuation played on a celesta, the keyboard instrument whose bell-like tones Tchaikovsky first popularized in *The Nutcracker*.

Sinatra enters discreetly and sings a chorus partly accompanied by a soft “bed” of sustained string chords—a touch specifically requested by the singer—and a springy two-beat bass line, with Riddle “getting the hell out of the way” by changing instrumental colors and background patterns from one phrase to the next without diverting attention from the vocal. At no time, not even in the introduction, does he use Porter’s melody in anything other than fragmented form. He leaves it to Sinatra, making the vocal stand out

in even higher relief.

At chorus’s end, the rhythm section shifts into straight-ahead four-four time for a 12-bar crescendo for trombones and strings that explodes into a thrillingly fiery trombone solo. Riddle then lowers the volume and Sinatra returns to sing another half-chorus, quickly screwing the tension back up and reaching the song’s climax (and the highest note in his vocal) as he sings, “But each time I do / Just the thought of you / *Makes* me stop just before I give in.” Once he does so, the volume drops again and the introductory riffs return as Sinatra sings the coda, followed by a surprise ending, a bitonal, Ravel-flavored chord for strings, celesta, and harp that hangs in the air for a breathless instant, then evaporates into silence.

Even when working with a much larger orchestra of near-symphonic proportions, as he did on *Only the Lonely*, Riddle scored torch songs with the same airy transparency that he brought to swinging numbers. This lightness of touch, which was his trademark, allowed Sinatra to plumb the depths of despair without spilling over into lugubriousness, and it was no less well suited to the brighter singing of Nat Cole and Ella Fitzgerald. With them as with Sinatra, Riddle was the nonpareil collaborator.

OUTSIDE the studio, Riddle was a man of glum temperament (his friend Julie Andrews, referring to the depressed donkey in *Winnie-the-Pooh*, nicknamed him “Eeyore”) who felt, not without reason, that he was underpaid and insufficiently recognized. He appears to have received a flat fee of \$150 for each of his Capitol charts, and, like all arrangers, he did not receive royalties, which went solely to singers and songwriters. In addition, he

received no front-cover credit for *Songs for Swingin' Lovers!* and was credited in the smallest possible type for *Only the Lonely*.

His own limitations were part of the problem: Unlike Henry Mancini, Riddle lacked the gift of melody and so was unable to establish himself as a songwriter, in addition to which he was a mediocre conductor with no stage presence, making it hard for him to appear as a solo artist.*

One wonders whether Riddle was for these reasons skeptical of the ultimate value of his own formidable musical talent. In the 1955 film *Young at Heart*, named after a Riddle-arranged hit single by Sinatra, the singer plays a bitter pianist-arranger who has never had the success as a songwriter for which he hungers. The fates, he believes, have chosen instead to sell him short. "They said, 'Let him have a little talent,'" he tells Doris Day bitterly. "Not enough to do anything great on his own, but just enough to help other people. That's what he deserves." Could it be that this part was written by screenwriters Lenore Coffee and Julius Epstein with Nelson Riddle in mind?

Perhaps as compensation for his lack of star power, Riddle was flagrantly and repeatedly unfaithful to Doreen, his long-suffering wife. She accused him of thinking only of music and sex, and when he described their quarrel to one of his sons, he added, "After all, what else is there?" Not surprisingly, he became romantically involved with a singer, Rosemary Clooney, and the relationship put a near-fatal strain on his marriage. Riddle's dissat-

* Felix Slatkin, Sinatra's regular concertmaster and the first violinist of the legendary Hollywood String Quartet, which accompanied him on the Riddle-arranged *Close to You* (1957), ghost-conducted several tracks on *Only the Lonely* that Riddle found too demanding to lead himself.

Unlike Henry Mancini, Riddle lacked the gift of melody and so was unable to establish himself as a songwriter, in addition to which he was a mediocre conductor with no stage presence, making it hard for him to appear as a solo artist.

isfaction grew more pronounced when Sinatra, stymied by the extent to which rock had carved away his own popularity, decided to stop working with him and collaborate instead with younger arrangers such as Don Costa on humiliatingly square performances of such top-40 songs as Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides Now" and Paul Simon's "Mrs. Robinson."

Riddle spoke of this latter development with resignation: "Sinatra is not inhibited by any particular loyalty. He had to think of Frank.... A different wave of music had come in and I was closely associated with him in a certain type of music, so he moved into other areas. It's almost like one changes one's clothes."

But Riddle had already shifted his focus to scoring films and TV series, and this work, which included distinctive main-title themes for

The Untouchables (1959–63) and *Route 66* (1960–64) and an Oscar-winning score for the 1974 screen version of *The Great Gatsby*, kept him afloat financially. He labored all but anonymously, however, and had Linda Ronstadt not invited him to arrange for *What's New* (1983), *Lush Life* (1984), and *For Sentimental Reasons* (1986), he would have ended his long career writing "additional music" for *Ne-whart*, the eponymous comedian's second sitcom.

Instead, Ronstadt brought him late-life fame, and the popular success of their albums also played a role in triggering a revival of the Great American Songbook that continues to this day. Would that he had lived to participate still further in that revival, but cirrhosis of the liver, a disease often associated with alcoholism, killed him at the age of 64, shortly before the release of *For Sentimental Reasons*.

Today, Riddle's style, especially as documented in the albums he recorded with Sinatra, is universally acknowledged as the high-water mark of postwar vocal arranging. Their making was a nerve-racking process for Riddle, who confessed to finding Sinatra terrifyingly mercurial: "Frank contributed a lot to the orchestral part of his own records, just by leveling a hostile stare at the musicians, with those magnetic blue eyes! The point of this action was to make me, or any other conductor, feel at that exact moment as if he had two left feet, three ears, and one eye."

But the resulting tension, he admitted, was "a positive factor that found its way into the record," and it brought out the best in Riddle. More than a half-century later, their albums sound as vital as ever—and his ability to overcome his fear of Sinatra and rise to the occasion is a large part of what has kept them so. 📖➡

Cain and Abelowicz

Competing with Idiots: Herman and Joe Mankiewicz, a Dual Portrait

BY NICK DAVIS

Alfred A. Knopf, 364 pages

Reviewed by RICK MARIN

ON THE HEELS of the much-lauded biopic *Mank* comes *Competing with Idiots*, a “dual portrait” by the documentary filmmaker Nick Davis of his grandfather, Herman J. “Mank” Mankiewicz, and his great-uncle, Joseph L. Mankiewicz. Unlike the well-intentioned but leadenly executed movie, the book is a fascinating family saga, played out against Hollywood’s Golden Age and driven by a sibling rivalry that puts Cain and Abel to shame.

In 1925, Herman cabled his friend Ben Hecht, then a Chicago newspaperman: “Millions are to be grabbed out here and your only competition is idiots. Don’t let this get around.” Hence the book’s title. But Davis may be freighting it with a double meaning. Herman often referred to Joe, 12 years his junior, as “my idiot brother.” No competition was more intense than the one between these two.

Such was the patrimony of their father, Franz Mankiewicz, a Berlin-born scholar and ferocious taskmaster who had immigrated to New York at the end of the 19th century and raised three children in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. He taught school and constantly be-

rated his firstborn if his grades were anything less than perfect. If young Herman got a 97 in a class, Franz glowered: “Where are the other three points?” Davis says this brilliant boy was “a magnet for his father’s displeasure.” Their mother, Johanna (namesake of Davis’s mother), was equally under Franz’s thumb and, because she never came to her sons’ defense, was written off by them as a hausfrau “uneducated in four languages.” In retrospect, Davis speculates, she may have been the secret source of the cleverness for which the Mankiewicz brothers—the elder the co-author of Marx Brothers movies and *Citizen Kane*, the younger the writer-director of *All About Eve*—were legendary.

How sharp was the Mank wit? Within the family Herman was considered “the funniest man who ever lived.” Examples: A studio head fires Herman, making the usual threats that he’ll never work at this or any other studio again. Herman’s deadpan reply: “Promises, promises.” Or watching Orson Welles walk by on the lot: “There but for the grace of God, goes God.” In one of his lesser movies, someone says it never rains in Los Angeles, to which the riposte is: “Only money.” Anything anyone ever said to Herman was a setup for a spontaneous punch line. In their New York days, Hecht dubbed him “the Voltaire of Central Park West.”

He passed Columbia’s entrance exam at 13, but not until 15 would he be old enough to attend, whereupon he discovered three passions that consumed the rest of his life: writing, drinking, and gambling.

Not necessarily in that order. He wrote for the student newspaper and humor magazine, but his first love was the theater. The play he wrote for Columbia’s big-deal Varsity Show was favorably reviewed in the *New York Times*. It didn’t take Herman long to find his way to a seat at the Algonquin Round Table after a stint as a foreign correspondent and press agent to Isadora Duncan in Weimar Berlin, but when Harold Ross fired him as theater critic at the *New Yorker*, there was nowhere for this young man to go but West.

MOVIES were still silent when Herman showed up, but his theater chops gave him a solid grounding in storytelling, and he elevated title-card writing from the woodenly melodramatic to the bright and clever. Once sound came in, Mank was golden, even in an era when studio bosses regarded writers as “schmucks with Underwoods.” In addition to Hecht and the Algonquin cronies he lured to the Coast with his “Fresh Air Fund for writers” was another hungry scribe in a hurry to make his mark and fortune—his younger brother.

Joe had always followed in Herman’s footsteps—first at Columbia, now Hollywood—and was always found by those who had experienced the Mank genius to be a tad wanting. The film critic Andrew Sarris titled a piece about Joe’s oeuvre “Less Than Meets the Eye.” But the two Mankiewiczzes were very different men. Herman was a compulsive rule-breaker. He questioned authority, refused to play the Hollywood game, ignored deadlines, offended power brokers. But Joe, Davis writes, “wanted to find out what the game was and win.” At all cost—not just professionally but in his relationship with his brother, his marriages, his children.

RICK MARIN *lives in Los Angeles and writes for television.*

Joseph L.
Mankiewicz
on the set of
Cleopatra,
1962.



Davis gives credence to the theory that Joe was the model for Sammy Glick in Budd Schulberg's searing novel about Hollywood ambition, *What Makes Sammy Run?* He describes a scene backstage at the 1951 Oscars. Joe, nominated for writing and directing *All About Eve*, is telling Billy Wilder (nominated for *Sunset Boulevard*) how honored he is to be considered in the same category as Wilder when, suddenly, he hears his name announced as the winner for Best Director and pushes Wilder out of the way "as if I were a stagehand." Joe was off to collect his prize. It was, Wilder said, "pure ambition." In that moment, Wilder was Bette Davis's Margo Channing, and Joe was Eve. But Joe's real Margo was his big brother. He had what he called his "Herman complex."

Herman's labors, unlike Joe's, were often invisible. He helped make box-office stars out of the Marx Bros. and inserted the notion in a

script draft that when Dorothy gets to Oz, the movie should become color. All the while, he was drinking and gambling his life away. Davis cites his grandfather's biographer, Richard Meryman, who wrote that "one million dollars passed through Herman's hands and left no residue." So long-suffering was his wife, Sara, that her nickname around town became "Poor Sara."

Meanwhile, Joe relentlessly climbed the ladder. He produced *The Philadelphia Story*, paired Tracy and Hepburn for the first time, and won back-to-back double Oscars (writing *and* directing) for *A Letter to Three Wives* and *All About Eve*—a feat yet to be replicated. Joe's inexorable rise intersected with Herman's "one-way ticket to the bottom," to the point where Joe could afford to start feeling sorry for his perennially broke and broken-down big brother. All Herman still had on him was the Oscar for *Citizen Kane*—a victory that

ignited Joe's envy rather than any kind of familial pride.

For all his flaws, Herman remained a warm, feeling man who never fell out of love with his wife and was a doting father to his three children. His youngest, Davis's mother, Johanna, was 15 when Herman died (in 1953, age 55) and her Uncle Joe took over as surrogate father. He paid for her education and funded charge accounts at the best department stores, but his generosity did not extend to the memory of her late father. He produced a fistful of IOUs as evidence of what a profligate mess Herman had been.

While Joe was beloved by actors, especially the female ones with whom he had countless affairs, in his personal life he was described by his own sister, Erna, as a "monster." While Joe was a "man of principles, a fighter for causes," she said, "you could sit for an entire evening and be practically in tears, and he

wouldn't notice. If there was something bothering you and you walked into a room where Herman was sitting reading, after three or four minutes he would look up and say, "What's the matter, kid?" As Davis writes, "the characters had solidified in nearly everyone's mind: Joe was cold and isolated, Herman a big-hearted mess."

Herman summarized his brother more succinctly, and witheringly. "Just once," he said, "I'd like to meet somebody at Joe's birthday party I'd seen the year before."



Herman Mankiewicz (in hat), John Houseman, Rita Alexander at work on the script for *Citizen Kane*, 1940.

Joe married three times, most significantly to a very likely bipolar Austrian actress-diva named Rosa, a woman whose fragile ego could not withstand life as Mrs. Joe Mankiewicz. When she finally killed herself, Joe recruited his niece Johanna, still in college, to come with him to their house in Mount Kisco, New York, almost certainly so that she would be the first to find the body. After her death, Joe removed all photos of Rosa from his sight and never spoke of her. Years later, he told his son Tom (then a writer of James Bond films) that he wanted to talk about Rosa. *Finally*, Tom thought, his father was going to open up about his mother. Instead, he wanted to ask

whether Tom would mind picking up the \$2,500 a year for upkeep on her grave. Not a surprising request perhaps, given Joe's behavior at her funeral. After shoveling dirt onto his late wife's coffin, he clapped his hands and announced, "Enough. Let's go."


After Herman's death, Joe stayed at the top of his game—adapting Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer*, an enormous hit. But that game, Davis writes, was "solitaire." He was paid a vast sum to take over the doomed *Cleopatra*, where the "double-headed hydra of Liz and Dick" (Taylor and Burton) gave him psoriasis so painful, he had to wear white film-cutter's gloves and needed daily B12 shots to keep him standing on three hours' sleep a night. After that epic bomb, released in 1963, he eventually redeemed his reputation, nine years

later, with *Sleuth*, an anti-*Cleopatra* two-hander starring Michael Caine and Laurence Olivier. And that was it, the wrap on Joe's career, for the next 20 years until his death in 1993. He tried to write but couldn't. His sharpness deserted him. He sat for interviews, in which he was increasingly described as "cranky" and "irascible." Davis met him near the end of his life and recalls that a "sour and dyspeptic odor was emanating from him that had the feel of something rotten, something deep within the man consuming itself."

That deep, consumptive ambition was the legacy both brothers passed down to their descendants—what Davis calls a "horrible, nonstop competitiveness" among a family of

ridiculous overachievers. Herman's son Frank was a decorated World War II vet who became RFK's press secretary and ran George McGovern's presidential campaign and ran National Public Radio. His children, Josh and Ben, became successful journalists and television personalities, Josh a reporter for *Dateline*, Ben a presenter on Turner Classic Movies. But none of it was ever good enough. When Johanna married Peter Davis, who would subsequently win both an Emmy and an Oscar for his left-leaning documentaries, Joe complained that her choice of husband was a little "thin." Herman's oldest son, Don, once gave his own son, John, a birthday present of three picture frames. The first featured Herman's Best Screenplay nomination for *The Pride of the Yankees*, the second showed Don's own Best Screenplay nomination for the 1958 Susan Hayward movie *I Want to Live*. The third frame, "of course, was blank." Johanna could never figure out why her Uncle Joe cut her off in her adulthood, until her cousin Tom explained it: "He always thought you'd be a star."

Even knowing this, Johanna couldn't help but pass the pressure down to her own son. When he was eight, a year before her tragic death after having been struck by a taxicab on a Greenwich Village street, she gave her little boy a copy of her novel, inscribed, "To Nicky, from one writer to another. All my love, Mommy." Davis found this surprising and horrifying. "Her labeling me a 'writer' served, when combined with her untimely death a year later, as an unintentional recipe for decades of anxiety and self-doubt (and may well be part of the reason for this book's nearly two-decade gestation)."

Well, if it's any consolation, the book is a wonderful achievement worthy of its subjects. They should make a movie out of it. It'd be better than *Mank*. 



HOLLYWOOD COMMENTARY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 72 parent as if nothing's wrong, as if the baby isn't loaded down with a very full diaper.

But what was AT&T supposed to do? Back in '16, its leaders had decided, like everyone else, that they needed to own a "content factory" in order to stay competitive in their core enterprise of wireless services and devices. What they didn't fully grasp was how expensive that was going to be.

About a century earlier, the Victor Talking Machine Company did exactly the same thing. At the time, Victor was a cutting-edge high-tech business. It manufactured the Victrola, one of the earliest consumer machines that could play recorded music. The Victor Talking Machine Company was what we would now call a "consumer-facing technology-hardware enterprise." But a tech company with great tech needs content, as contemporary consumer-facing technology-hardware enterprises like Sony and Apple have discovered. The Victor Talking Machine Company made a machine that reproduced sound. But without sound recordings, it wouldn't sell many Talking Machines.

So, in 1927, one of their more entrepreneurial employees headed down to Bristol—half of the town is in Tennessee and half in Virginia—and offered to pay local singers and musicians to come and record their music. A makeshift recording studio was set up at a local furniture store and people came from miles around to sing and play. The performers (whom we now call "content creators") were paid \$50 and received a two-and-a-half cents royalty per record sale, which in 1927 was not bad at all. These recordings became known as the Bristol Sessions, and in addition to creating content for the Victrola people, they incidentally pretty much invented country music. The simplicity of that business move—we have a machine, we pay you to sing into our machine—developed into the tangled and complicated entertainment business of today.

The history of the Victor Talking Machine Company tells the century-long story of the media business. Victor joined with the Radio Corporation of America, which eventually purchased the National Broadcasting Company, which was then swallowed up by General Electric and combined with Universal Pictures. Eventually, after exhausting and failed diversions with Japanese electronics giant Matsushita, liquor

dynasty Seagram's, French water-and-media conglomerate Vivendi, NBCUniversal was sold to Comcast, an enormous cable-television outfit, because if you have a company that supplies cable television to American homes, you're going to need to buy a studio.

Which, of course, is nonsense. In many ways, owning a motion picture and television studio is the *least* efficient way to run a cable empire or a talking-machine company. The business theory behind this kind of vertical integration is the fear that if you don't own a studio, no one will sell you their content—which is sort of like saying if you don't own a farm, no one will sell you a hamburger.

Hollywood is positively thronged with people who will sell you their scripts, services, acting talent, and pretty much whatever. Studios and creative enterprises work best—both in terms of efficiency and as hit-machines—when they're free to take risks, hear fresh pitches, try something new, put a lot of chips down on the felt. Hit shows don't come from a reorganized company. They come from a disorganized company.

Even Disney, the most successful and tightly organized media business around, sticks resolutely to its knitting. Disney's recent move into streaming video, Disney+, has so far been a rousing success. Disney owns no Internet service providers, no cable outfits, zero talking machines. Disney makes content and looks to someone else to provide the pipes. The trouble begins, as AT&T discovered, when you try to do it the other way around.

Which is not to say that Hollywood is a bad business. It's a terrific business for a lot of people. One of the ways you can learn about an industry is to take note of who got rich and how. In show business, some rich folks—directors, producers, actors, rarely writers—got rich by selling their talents and services to the highest bidder. Other rich folks—studio chiefs and assorted executives—got rich by negotiating giant pay packages and fat stock options. Notice who isn't on the list? That's right: shareholders. Show business is a great place for individuals to get very wealthy. Publicly held companies, not so much.

So when you get right down to it, Martin Davis was right and Brandon Tartikoff was wrong. Hollywood is not a casino. It's not a game of craps. Because a game of craps you can win. 🎲



HOLLYWOOD COMMENTARY

The Game of Showbiz Crap(s)

ROB LONG

WHEN THE LATE Brandon Tartikoff was the chairman of Paramount Pictures in the 1990s, he told the *New York Times* that the movie and television business was a “crapshoot.”

His boss at the time, Martin Davis, didn’t like opening his newspaper and discovering that the company he ran was engaged in something so risky, so unscientific, and so irrational as a game of craps, especially after making the case to a lot of institutional investors that his company was different.

That’s what a lot of professional gamblers say, by the way: *I’m different, see. I have a system.*

So he called Tartikoff on the phone and reprimanded him. *This is not a crapshoot*, he is supposed to have said. *I do not run a casino.*

But what’s so bad about running a casino? Casinos make a lot of money. Casinos, in fact, have a pretty perfect business. If Mark Zuckerberg, say, decided, *What the heck, I’ve got 60-something billion dollars, let me live a little*, and he sauntered into a Las Vegas casino and tried to put \$5 billion on red, some big guy in a bad suit and an earpiece would forcibly guide the fragile, brittle-boned Zuckerberg into a quiet room where he’d be given another drink—not that he’d need another one, probably; the guy almost put \$5 billion down on red!—and he’d be told that in this and every casino, if you want to wager 5 billion dollars—and by the way, they *do* want you to wager 5 billion dollars—you must do it in smaller, mathematically precise increments. Because the casino knows the more bets you make, the better the odds for them. The casino, unlike Hollywood, has a system.

Eventually, Paramount was bought by Viacom, which merged with CBS, which then split into two companies, which have recently been rejoined, because

the rule of the media business is, if your company is languishing, you’d better buy something, unless you recently tried that, in which case you’d better sell something.

But in between the splitting and the rejoining—somewhere around 2016—an asset-management company called SpringOwl released a PowerPoint deck criticizing the management and performance of the company. There’s lots in it about upside-down growth, soaring executive compensation, lagging behind competitors, flop movies and shows, and the possibly incapacitated elderly owner, Sumner Redstone. But the best part of the deck is this one sentence, describing the predictably excellent results that would come from instituting the changes that the asset-management brains suggested:

“New hit shows,” the deck confidently avers, “will come from the transformed creative company.”

If your reaction, after reading that sentence, was to nod sagely and think, *Good point, hit movies and television shows are really just about adjusting the management processes and getting the organizational chart just right*, then you’d fit right in with the management team at AT&T. In 2016, AT&T purchased TimeWarner—which owned the sprawling Warner Bros. film and television studio and a collection of cable enterprises, including TBS and HBO—and immediately set about instituting its own set of adjustments and reforms and restructurings, very much along the lines of what the SpringOwl Asset Management LLC folks suggested for that other lumbering media giant that same year.

Here’s how it went: In May 2021, while awaiting the “new hit shows will come from the transformed creative company” phase, AT&T decided to combine the entire division with cable outfit Discovery and pass the newly formed bundle along to shareholders. It did this the way a parent will sometimes casually hand an infant over to the other

CONTINUED ON PAGE 71

ROB LONG has been the executive producer of six TV series.

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