WHAT WE HAVE GOTTEN RIGHT IN THE COVID FIGHT

BY YUVAL LEVIN

9/11, TWENTY YEARS LATER

BRIAN STEWART

THE CROWN HEIGHTS RIOT, THIRTY YEARS LATER

EDWARD KOSNER
This High Holiday season, as we seek spiritual and physical renewal for ourselves and our loved ones, let us also remember those in Israel who nurture and renew life every day. Whether it’s treating civilians wounded in terror and rocket attacks or vaccinating them against Covid-19, no organization in Israel saves more lives than Magen David Adom.

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DAN SENOR, ROAST CHAIRMAN
# Commentary

**September 2021  Vol. 152 : No. 2**

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To the Editor:
JAMES B. MEIGS is correct that Big Pharma’s response to the COVID pandemic was impressive, but he ignores the fact that Americans pay the full freight for new drug development for the whole world (“Thank God for Big Pharma,” June). Insulin costs 10 times as much in the United States as it does in Canada. Americans die from lack of access to a drug that has been available for 100 years. The price of adalimumab (Humira) has been raised 25 percent in the last two years with no real justification. Antivirals for hepatitis C are so expensive that insurance companies have limited access to the medications. If paying for the drugs yourself, it is cheaper to vacation in the Caribbean and get the same medication there than to stay home and be treated. Big Pharma has a lot to answer for.

RICHARD A. BAUM, M.D.
Baltimore, Maryland

Defending Big Pharma

James B. Meigs writes:
I THINK IT’S telling that both these letters concerning drug prices come from physicians. It must be so discouraging to write prescriptions for vital medications knowing that some patients won’t be able to afford them. And both doctors are correct that our system of pricing drugs in the U.S. is a confusing hodgepodge. The current system gives pharma companies incentives to slap the highest possible list prices on their products. Between insurance plans and the rebates that “pharmacy benefit managers” pass through, most consumers don’t pay full price. But some do, and that’s unfair.

To the Editor:
JAMES B. MEIGS correctly points out the roles of Big Pharma and Operation Warp Speed in producing a vaccine in less than a year. President Trump also tried to address the problem of Big Pharma’s setting much higher prices for drugs sold in the United States than elsewhere. Perhaps the author could comment on that continuing issue.

SEYMOUR M. COHEN, M.D.
New York City

September 2021
It would take another full-length article to address all the proposals to tackle this problem. But in general, I think the best approach involves increasing competition rather than imposing regulations that would reduce incentives for innovation. For example, it is surprisingly hard to get a new generic drug through the approval process. That’s one reason there is no generic version of insulin today. If we could streamline that process, it would mean more options for physicians and lower costs for patients. There’s no question our current system has room for improvement. But our mostly free-market approach to pharmaceuticals has produced one lifesaving innovation after another. The amazing COVID-19 vaccines are just the latest example. Let’s not destroy this system in the name of trying fix it. When it comes to regulating Big Pharma, our motto should be: First do no harm.

Patent Mending

To the Editor:

MICHAEL M. ROSEN’S article discusses the limited use of a patent to enable those less familiar with the mRNA technology to reproduce the vaccines efficiently and effectively without contaminants (“Biden’s Patent Madness,” June). I think of it this way: A patent identifies what is unique about an invention and has as much use in its manufacture as a property deed would have in the building of a house.

JON LACHMAN
Jupiter, Florida
To the Editor:

I LOVED Michael M. Rosen’s article. It provided a rare voice of sanity in this discussion. This debate is missing a party with a win-win mindset. Why is no one talking about purchasing the patents and open-sourcing them?

MOSTAPHA BENHENDA
Paris, France


Michael M. Rosen writes:

JON LACHMAN posits that patents covering COVID-19 vaccines are inappropriate because they’re irrelevant to manufacturing vaccine doses. But Pfizer’s, Moderna’s, Johnson & Johnson’s, and AstraZeneca’s patents cover both the vaccine formulations themselves as well as methods of manufacturing them. Forcing these companies to relinquish these rights, which were hard-earned through dedicated, expensive research and development, would create a grave injustice and impede future breakthroughs. In Mr. Lachman’s terms, it would be akin to handing Ms. Smith’s property deed to Mr. Jones: It’s unfair to Ms. Smith in particular and destabilizes property rights in general.

Many thanks to Mostapha Benhenda for his kind words and thoughtful proposal. While it’s unlikely that any one company, individual, or country possesses both the resources to purchase the relevant patents and the expertise to deploy them skillfully, plenty of other win-win opportunities are worthy of pursuit, including America’s and other governments’ purchase of vaccine doses for developing countries and Moderna’s agreement not to enforce its patents during the pandemic.


Blame Hamas

To the Editor:

JONATHAN SCHANZER has written an excellent, in-depth, and well-documented article (“The War Between Wars Heats Up,” June). I offer a small but important point in light of the social- and mainstream-media nonsense about Jews “occupying” and “stealing” land or “taking over homes”: The dispute in the Silwan and Sheikh Jarrah neighborhoods in Jerusalem should be clearly explained. These homes were built by Jews before 1948 (the neighborhoods were called “Kfar HaShiloakh” and “Shimon HaTsaddik”). The Jordanians expelled the Jews from their homes when they conquered the area in 1948. Those Jews were replaced by Arabs from the Talbieh neighborhood in western Jerusalem.

After the 1967 war, the Jewish owners went to court to have their homes returned to them. For political reasons, there was a compromise: The Arabs were upgraded to legal tenants (with no ownership rights), on condition that they pay the legal owners a symbolic rent of about 25 percent of the going rate for similar rentals.

After the Oslo Accords, the Palestinian Authority ordered these renters not to pay the monthly rent (circa 1995). For 25 years, the Jews appealed in courts, but the issue was not resolved, mostly because “evicting” Arabs from homes was a politically sensitive issue.

Now the issue of delinquent tenants getting evicted from rented homes has been made into an international cause célèbre. The fiction that’s been built around this issue, added to innumerable similar fictions, is nothing more than propaganda that is swallowed by too many people.

PETER GROSS
Knoxville, Tennessee

THE SHEIKH JARRAH real-estate dispute was one of several false narratives perpetuated by Palestinian rejectionists and the international media during the 2021 Gaza conflict. Real-estate disputes don’t cause wars. Rockets and bombs do. And in this case, it was Hamas that elected to begin firing projectiles at Jerusalem, some 50 miles away from where the dispute was taking place. Also lost in the breathless media coverage was the fact that Israel’s judicial system was handling the case. Those who blame Israel for the outbreak of the war because of a legal dispute are tacitly suggesting that the Israeli government should have somehow scuttled the case in order to placate the Palestinians. This is not how legitimate legal systems operate. An entire chapter devoted to this episode will be included in my forthcoming book on the Gaza war. It’s due out, via FDD Press, in October 2021.

Letters : September 2021
To the Editor:
CHRISTINE Rosen really touches on something important in her Media Commentary column ("The Reality Distortion Field," June). The fire and fury around the issues du jour are skewing our perceptions of how much has been accomplished and the relative size of how much is left to do.

The fights over women’s suffrage were more than 100 years ago and affected half the population. The fights over civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s were against the evils of Jim Crow and affected about 12 to 13 percent of the national population. In the 1990s and 2000s, the battle was engaged on behalf of gay rights, which affects 3.5 percent of the population. Now we have moved on to transgender rights, which affects around 0.3 to 0.6 percent of the population. Based on the shrillness of the discussion today, one would think that now would be a terrible time to be a woman, to be black, to be gay, or to be transgender. But when in history would it have been any safer than today to be any of those?

The left’s approach has shifted radically. With the push to legalize same-sex marriage, the idea was to win over hearts and minds and offer people the chance to be on the right side of history. Now, with transgenderism, there’s a race to catch up with all of the newly created terms and vernacular that must be used to show that one is in the know. And if you question any of the orthodoxy, you are deemed transphobic and guilty of trying to “erase” people who are transgender. Past rights battles were about equality; the current ones are about favoring certain people. Some transgender people are pushing for this shift, but I suspect it’s mostly non-trans liberals who are screaming the loudest about it. They believe in something passionately that they were only made aware of a few years ago—and now everyone else must get in line.

John Boren
Monmouth, Oregon

Christine Rosen writes:
I APPRECIATE John Boren’s historical perspective. The current generation’s demands for greater social justice rarely include anything similarly informed, which leads them not to greater understanding but to history as hyperbole—i.e., everything with which they disagree they label “Jim Crow 2.0” or “white supremacy.”

I agree that the shift on the left from focusing on equality of opportunity to equality of outcome (now called “equity”) is an affront to the very principles that allowed earlier movements for social justice to flourish. Moreover, the increasingly aggressive calls to use state power to enforce these questionable “equity” policies and to suppress the free-speech rights of those who disagree with such initiatives will only increase if our K–12 schools continue down the path of adopting a critical-race-theory perspective in their teaching about the U.S., and the mainstream media promotes questionable ideological projects that attempt to rewrite history to suit present-day ideological claims.

Yes, our country’s history is filled with terrible events and people; but it is also and even more so an ongoing and extraordinary story of how ideas about freedom, equality, and the dignity of the human person, when embraced by a committed and heterogenous people, can create a powerful and free nation. Those who claim to be committed to justice will never achieve it if they neglect those ideals.
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EARLY IN MY CAREER, I worked at a magazine called Video Review. We tested the latest equipment and reviewed video releases: movies, concerts, Jane Fonda workouts, and the like. One day we received an unsolicited, homemade documentary about UFOs. Soon more videos followed, along with long, impassioned letters about the impending arrival of beneficent aliens who would show the grubby human race a more enlightened path. We learned that the UFO buffs of that period were very excited about the video revolution. With so many camcorders in civilian hands, they believed, it was only a matter of time before every UFO sighting would be backed up with solid video evidence.

Somehow, the boom in camcorder sales failed to produce a flood of persuasive UFO footage. Today, nearly half the people on Planet Earth carry around high-definition smartphone cameras. Yet even this exponential explosion in our ability to capture images hasn’t notably increased the supply of tangible evidence for UFOs.

Still, many have clung to the notion that there is ample evidence of alien spacecraft sightings, it’s just locked away in secret government programs. As it turns out, there are grains of truth in this idea: The U.S. military has been looking into reports of UFOs, or, as it now calls them, UAPs—Unidentified Aerial Phenomena. Starting over a decade ago, lawmakers pushed the Department of Defense to investigate accounts offered by military aviators of strange things they were seeing in the skies. Eventually, the DOD launched an “Unidentified Aerial Phenomena Task Force.”

More recently, several provocative videos, shot by the crews of U.S. Navy aircraft, leaked out on the Internet. They appeared to show strange airborne entities performing unusual maneuvers. Some researchers were quick to call the leaked videos “legitimate sightings of actual UFOs.” Other analysts worried that perhaps some military adversary had developed a “breakthrough technology” and was testing it off our shores.

In 2020, Senator Marco Rubio, then head of the Intelligence Committee, ordered the director of national intelligence to produce a public report on what the UAP Task Force has found so far. Released in June 2021, “Preliminary Assessment: Unidentified Aerial Phenomenon” failed either to confirm the existence of spectacular unknown technologies or to debunk claims of strange sightings.

That might not satisfy either side, but to me it suggests the DNI is taking the right approach.

Before going further, let me be clear: Nothing I write here is intended to suggest that UFOs couldn’t possibly exist, or that extraterrestrial civilizations couldn’t conceivably visit our planet. Nor is it impossible that Russia or China might have leapfrogged all known aerospace technologies. Finally, I am not suggesting that the military fliers who have reported encounters with unexplained phenomena (often at the risk of being ostracized) are making things up. What I am suggesting is that ambiguous data can be...ambiguous. Doctors in training are often admonished, “When you hear hoofbeats, think horses, not zebras.” In other words, start
with the most likely explanation for a symptom before assuming it must be caused by some exotic disease. That’s a good rule of thumb for UFO sightings, too.

So let’s take a look at that DNI report. At a mere nine pages, it lives up to its “preliminary” title. It says investigators looked into 144 reports. In 18 of those incidents, “observers reported unusual UAP movement patterns or flight characteristics”—in other words, they involved objects that gave the impression of being under some sort of control. The report concludes that most UAP sightings “probably do represent physical objects.” Those objects likely fall into one of several categories. There’s “airborne clutter,” such as birds, balloons, and plastic bags. And there’s “natural atmospheric phenomena,” including clouds and thermal layers that can confuse radar and other sensors. More intriguing is the idea that pilots might be encountering secret experimental aircraft launched by the U.S. government or private industry, or even “foreign adversary systems.”

But the more closely one reads the report, the less evidence one finds that American fliers are crossing paths with exotic technology, earthly or otherwise. In only one case were investigators able to identify a UAP “with high confidence.” That one turned out to be “a large, deflating balloon.” In other cases, the lack of “sufficient information in our dataset” made further conclusions impossible.

The report says that slightly over half of the sightings involved “observation with multiple sensors.” Clearly having more than one data source—say, a pilot’s visual observation plus a separate radar track—is key. But the report hints that the most provocative cases (the ones involving unusual, aircraft-like movements) were based on single data points. “These observations could be the result of sensor errors, spoofing, or observer misperception,” the report notes.

But what about those stunning Navy videos? In one, dubbed “GOFAST,” a small white object appears to be racing across the wave tops as the aircrew of a F/A-18 Super Hornet tracks it with their weapons camera. It certainly looks convincing. But an analysis by visual-effects expert Mick West shows why such footage can be deceiving. In the case of GOFAST, the problem is the “parallax illusion.” Imagine you are looking out the window of a moving train watching a windmill in a field, with a range of mountains in the background. From your perspective, objects near the train seem to be rushing by quickly, while the windmill drops behind more slowly, and the distant mountains more slowly still. Now, imagine watching the windmill through a small spyglass: You can’t see the foreground or the field, so you have no visual reference telling you that all the movements you see are connected. Suddenly the windmill will appear to be rushing backwards while the mountains appear stationary.

Helpfully, the gun-camera footage includes readouts showing the jet fighter’s altitude and speed, as well as the orientation of the camera pod. These data reveal that, rather than being a fast-moving, low-flying aircraft, the white object is actually drifting slowly at a fairly high altitude—yes, it’s probably another balloon. The F/A-18 is flying higher still, so when its camera zooms in on the object, that little white dot is framed against the ocean—which the dot appears to be racing past not because it is moving but because the background is moving. After all, the jet is flying at nearly 300 miles per hour. Even to the experienced airmen watching, this illusion of movement is stunningly convincing.

West’s analyses of other Navy video clips reveal similar illusions, including common technical glitches in how video cameras operate. West’s work isn’t the last word. But it helps show the kinds of errors that can creep into human observations.

But aren’t military pilots trained observers? Yes, but not as neutral scientific observers of aerial phenomena. Rather, they are conditioned to be hyperalert to possible threats. When professionals spend their careers looking for potentially threatening airborne technology, and then they see something strange in the sky, we can’t fault them for thinking it might be... potentially threatening airborne technology. The same goes for radar operators trying to make sense of weird signals on their scopes.

The UAP Task Force took a valuable step by encouraging military personnel to document any and all anomalous observations. Service people shouldn’t have to fear they’ll be considered a little bonkers for reporting what they see. The task force also created a standardized format in which to collect that data. Those changes have helped increase the number of UAP reports but haven’t led to any concrete evidence of super-sophisticated Chinese or Russian aircraft, much less visitors from celestial realms.

The word “unexplained” comes up a lot in the DNI report. That word certainly doesn’t mean “debunked.” Nor does it mean “something mind-blowing that we haven’t quite proved yet.” But it’s worth noting that when the U.S. Navy conducts flight operations, it is also operating one of the world’s most sophisticated data-acquisition systems. And yet, with all that data, we still can’t always distinguish between super-advanced aerospace vehicles and stray balloons and birds. Which is more likely? It’s natural that people get excited about seeing zebras. And we shouldn’t prematurely rule out zebras. But when we hear hoofbeats, dull as it might sound, it’s probably horses.»
NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO recently announced that it had revised its ethics policy to allow its reporters to “participate in activities that advocate for ‘the freedom and dignity of human beings’ on both social media and in real life.” The policy also lifted a previous prohibition on NPR employees participating in “marches, rallies, and public events.”

Now NPR employees are free to “express support for democratic, civic values that are core to NPR’s work, such as, but not limited to: the freedom and dignity of human beings, the rights of a free and independent press, the right to thrive in society without facing discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, disability, or religion.”

At a time when public trust in mainstream-media institutions is at an all-time low, it’s perhaps not the worst thing for a news outlet to call for greater transparency among its journalists. The policy might succeed if NPR journalists are honest in their disclosures of their activism. And who could be against promoting the “freedom and dignity of human beings”?

But the policy itself will never face a true test of its ethical durability. NPR journalists and their editors are already a self-selected bunch. No one honestly believes public-radio bosses will be parsing the ethical nuances of whether a pro-life NPR reporter should be allowed to picket outside a Planned Parenthood abortion facility, because that would never happen. Rather, they are likely to rubber-stamp staffers’ requests to attend a Black Lives Matter rally or whatever is the left-liberal protest cause du jour.

More challenging will be enforcing the social-media component of the new policy. Because what forced the hand of NPR to loosen its restrictions on journalists advocating for causes wasn’t a new sense of civic duty or ethical responsibility. It was pressure from a new generation of reporters who can’t imagine a world where they merely hold personal beliefs. They must be allowed—nay, encouraged!—to promote and perform them on social media.

As NPR itself noted in its description of the committee convened to draft the new ethics rules, “in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, a younger generation of journalists pushed NPR to modify its traditional prohibitions.” NPR’s “chief diversity officer,” Keith Woods, was named the co-chair of the committee that wrote the new policy. An NPR reporter quotes Woods as saying that at one end of the committee were “people who would go so far as to use the word ‘objectivity,’” while at the other end of the spectrum were the “burn-it-all-down kinds of folks.” It tells you a great deal about mainstream journalism today that even invoking the word “objectivity” was viewed as possibly going too far.

Christine Rosen is Commentary’s senior writer.

Commentary
This has become even more pronounced in the era of woke politics and the required public posturing such politics demand. It is no longer sufficient to keep your personal opinions private or try to remain neutral; everyone must choose a side (because silence is violence). As a result, everything is now an act of resistance—from the kinds of books you buy (if you haven't read Antiracist Baby, by Ibram X. Kendi, then you're probably a racist and so is your child), to the politicians you choose to retweet on Twitter. Every choice signals an allegiance, and that signal is the only noise that matters.

The politics of personal expression enabled by social media merges well with journalism's embrace of this woke revolution. As NPR notes, “Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American journalists have argued that they have been disproportionately confined by—even disciplined over—policies that limit personal expression.” Our nation's post–George Floyd “racial reckoning” is now frequently used by journalists to justify “my truth” (as opposed to impartiality) as an active and improved posture for reporters, particularly reporters keen to view events through the lens of identity politics. And they promote “their truth” as akin to universal values about human dignity. As former Washington Post reporter (now at CBS) Wesley Lowery tweeted about the new NPR policy, “it says something that a news organization would need to *update* their policies to allow employees to express ‘support’ for ‘the freedom and dignity of human beings, the rights of a free and independent press.’”

This new contempt for objectivity, professional detachment, and impartiality doesn’t signal a new attention to ethics in journalism. It heralds the new era of “post-journalism,” as Andrey Mir has described it. A younger generation of journalists views traditional journalistic values as antediluvian, as well as a hindrance to the expression of their own ideological beliefs. The aging producers and editors and journalists who went into journalism assuming these were important values have either left the profession (willingly or by force) or feel obliged to offer caveats to even the mildest defense of impartiality.

The results of this post-journalistic approach have been decidedly mixed. We have been given some transparency about the partisan bias of some reporters (Yamiche Alcindor, call your office). But the already unhealthy solipsism of the profession has increased exponentially. Reporters now cover the professional maneuverings involved in reporter Nikole Hannah-Jones's pursuit of tenure at a J-school.

In some sense we should care, because the logical products of this new form of journalism are questionable ideas bearing the imprimatur of professional institutions. For example, in its journalism predictions for 2021, the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University devoted space to an argument for “reparative journalism.” As outlined by journalism professor Meredith Clark—who likened today's newsrooms to Jim Crow and often puts the word *objectivity* in scare quotes—reparative journalism does “the work of racial justice, and by extension—without apology—social justice.” She wants to see the “core value” of initiatives like the *Times*’ controversial 1619 Project “normalized,” which is odd considering how much money the *Times* has made in 1619 merchandising, and she claims she is opposed to “racial capitalism that values and reifies white dominance.”

In fact, like many woke initiatives, reparative journalism is about power and who gets the plum jobs. As Clark argues, “reparative journalism requires the redistribution of power—a phrase that often causes white folks—who, not coincidentally, make up more than 70 percent of the U.S. news industry’s workforce—to blanch when it’s uttered in the service of racial justice and liberation.”

No wonder values such as impartiality and neutrality appeal quaint. As Martin Gurri has argued: “Post-journalism, in truth, is a business model concealed behind an ideological stance. It sells a creed, an agenda, to like-minded believers. It identifies the existential fears of a specific audience, then manufactures what that audience will buy.”

For now, NPR’s new ethics policy will likely still prevent a reporter who marches with BLM to report on it as if his or her views are objective. But it marks a further slide into journalism as “my truth” and away from the ideal of objective reporting.

And it contributes to a dangerous hubris. Today’s elite journalists often speak of themselves and their work as if describing the vaunted duties of high clerics or angels, forgetting their profession’s baser origins; journalists were for centuries viewed as the guttersnipes of the literary world, often rightly so. In *Lost Illusions*, Balzac’s main character goes to Paris to become a poet. But he ends up a hack journalist, and the moral compromises he makes in service to his ambition do not lead to a happy ending. Were Balzac alive today, he would find that those hack journalists have now become a profession as fickle, vain, and dishonest as the French beau monde he so vividly sketched in his work. —
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OE BIDEN is playing hard to get. He's involved in an unrequited love affair: The media adore him, but he hates them. He routinely shows his temper in exchanges with reporters. He calls them names and demeans their profession. He snaps and complains at the first sign of dissent. The reporters shrug it off: Ha, ha, no harm done. His interruptions, insults, and bloopers don't repel the White House press corps—they make 'em swoon.

The contrast between Biden's relationship with the media and that of his predecessor couldn't be more glaring. When Donald Trump was president, journalists cast themselves as Millennial Bob Woodwards and Zoomer Carl Bernsteins, valiant fighters for truth in a world darkened by lies. Now they are back to playing palace guard—for a king who wishes they'd just go away.

The 2020 campaign offered a preview of this tortured dynamic. Biden was on track to becoming the oldest president in American history, but his age was brought up only rarely. He'd been in national politics for half a century, yet his campaign was one of the least scrutinized ever. Biden's strategy was obvious: Stay in the basement and let President Trump alienate independents and suburban voters through incessant exposure. The press was happy to help. It suppressed the revelations of self-dealing inside Hunter Biden's laptop. It hardly commented on the radical agenda Joe Biden was planning in the event that he won.

A few individuals tried to ask the Democratic nominee some tough questions. Biden greeted them all the same way: He yelled at, lampooned, mocked, and was otherwise churlish to men and women who were just doing their job. In May 2020, when radio DJ Lenard "Charlamagne tha God" McKelvey asked Biden why black voters should support him, Biden replied, "If you have a problem figuring out whether you're for me or Trump, then you ain't black."

Cringe.

Not for the last time, Biden was forced to apologize for his rude behavior. Hours later, speaking to the Black Chamber of Commerce, he took back his insulting remark. “I should not have been so cavalier,” he said. “I’ve never, never, ever taken the African-American community for granted. I shouldn’t have been such a wise guy.”

No, he shouldn’t have been. But Biden didn’t learn the lesson. In August 2020, CBS reporter Errol Barnett asked him whether he’d taken a cognitive test. Biden grew enraged. “No, I haven’t taken a test,” he said. “Why the hell should I take a test? Come on, man.

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Commentary

MATTHEW CONTINETTI

WASHINGTON COMMENTARY
That’s like saying to you, before you got on this program, [did] you take a test where you’re taking cocaine or not. What do you think? Huh? Are you a junkie?”

Barnett is black.

Double cringe.

Biden is inaccessible. He has limited interactions with the press. He answers just a handful of questions from a pre-selected list of reporters. He frequently relies on notes. Journalists often find themselves shouting at him, in the hopes that he’ll respond off the cuff.

This behavior clearly annoys Biden on two levels: He doesn’t like being yelled at, and he hates inconvenient information.

Last November, CBS correspondent Bo Erickson asked the president-elect, “Mr. Biden, the COVID task force said it’s safe for students to be in class. Are you going to be encouraging unions to cooperate more to bring kids back to the classrooms, sir?” Biden replied, “Why are you the only guy that always shouts questions?”

The media’s one-sided romance continued into Biden’s presidency. In March, PBS White House correspondent Yamiche Alcindor spoke for many of her colleagues when she told the president during a press conference that “the perception of you that you got elected as a moral, decent man is the reason a lot of immigrants are coming to this country and are trusting you with unaccompanied minors.” I’ve watched Hallmark movies less maudlin than Alcindor.

In May, Biden visited Cleveland. As is his habit, he dropped by an ice-cream shop. The press had the opportunity to ask him questions as he licked his cone. What was the first question he was asked outside Honey Hut Ice Cream? “Mr. President,” asked one grizzled, cynical scribe, “what did you order?”


If you are a reporter who asks Biden about something other than ice cream, chances are you will get a prickly answer. For example, around the same time as the Cleveland trip, Biden was test-driving a new pickup truck on the White House lawn. A journalist wanted to know whether he could ask the president about the conflict between Israel and Hamas. “No, you can’t,” Biden said. “Not unless you get in front of the car as I step on it.” That’s our Joe—making cracks about running over the Fourth Estate. What a joker.

In June, Biden traveled to Geneva for a pointless summit with Russian autocrat Vladimir Putin. After the meeting, Putin gave a press conference. Then it was Biden’s turn. After Biden wrapped up, CNN’s Katie Collins asked him why he was “so confident” that Putin would change his malign behavior. Biden lost it.

“I’m not confident he’ll change his behavior,” he said. “What in the hell, what do you do all the time? When did I say I was confident?”

Collins held her ground. She observed that Putin continues to deny Russian involvement in cyberattacks against America and continues to minimize human-rights abuses within Russia. “So,” she went on, “how does that amount to a constructive meeting?” Biden, fuming, said, “If you don’t understand that, you’re in the wrong business.” Then he left.

Once again, Biden had to issue a mea culpa. On the airport tarmac before boarding Air Force One and returning to the United States, he said, “I owe my last question an apology. I shouldn’t have been such a wise guy with the last answer I gave.”

But the problem is that Biden is a “wise guy” with every answer he gives. On July 2, Biden delivered some remarks about good job numbers. The White House reporters, though, wanted to ask him about Afghanistan, where the Taliban is running wild. Biden scoffed.

“I want to talk about happy things, man,” he said.

“Look, it’s the Fourth of July.”

A few weeks later, as he left the East Room after announcing a coronavirus vaccine mandate for federal employees, Fox News Channel’s Peter Doocy asked Biden whether he recalled saying, “If you are fully vaccinated, you no longer need to wear a mask.” That wasn’t enough of a “happy thing” for Biden. “That is true at the time!” he shouted. “Because I thought there were people who were going to understand that getting vaccinated made a gigantic difference. What happened was, a new variant came along, they didn’t get vaccinated, it was spread more rapidly, and more people are getting sick. That’s the difference.”

But there isn’t any difference between the way Biden treats Fox’s Doocy and his high-handed rebukes of journalists who work for, shall we say, friendlier networks. On July 26, during a White House meeting with the prime minister of Iraq, veteran NBC News reporter Kelly O’Donnell asked Biden about a vaccine mandate for health-care workers at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). “You are such a pain in the neck,” Biden said. “But I’m going to answer your question because we’ve known each other so long.”

O’Donnell didn’t flinch. “I take that as a compliment, Mr. President,” she said. Biden laughed. Yes, he told her, there would be a VA mandate. The wise guy must have been feeling generous.

Irritable, volatile, and often confused, Biden’s version of “normalcy” is to treat the press like spoiled brats. And because there’s a “D” at the end of his name, the press takes the negativity as an invitation to court him further. [>]
WAT IS JUDAISM’S holiest site? It is a simple question with an obvious answer. Thrice daily, Jews pray for the restoration of sacred service to Jerusalem’s Temple Mount. It is toward this location that all Jewish prayers have been poured out since the Temple was destroyed. The Mount is the only area on earth where, according to a Jewish law, certain parts cannot be entered in a state of ritual impurity, and many traditional Jews have refrained from ascending to the site lest they violate Jewish law.

Yet many now believe that, with a knowledge of the layout, history, and religious laws pertaining to the location, it is permissible to visit certain parts of the Temple Mount Plaza. They do so under religious guidance, immersing first in a ritual bath, or mikvah, in order to commune with the God they believe still dwells at what is unquestionably Judaism’s holiest site.

In doing so, however, they have still been forced to abide by the “status quo” established by Moshe Dayan in the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War. Religious authority over the area is largely exercised by the Muslim waqf, and visiting Jews are literally forbidden to pray. Despite this indignity, religious Jews have continued to come, recently by the many thousands. One of the most popular days of the year to visit is the Ninth of Av, when the Temple was destroyed. The Temple’s destruction is the reason that this day is the saddest of the Jewish calendar, because—obviously—the Temple Mount is Judaism’s holiest site.

It was on the Ninth of Av this year that rioting Arabs sought to prevent Jewish visitation. They failed. In a published statement, newly installed Prime Minister Naftali Bennett “thanked the public security minister and the Israel Police [chief] for managing the events on the Temple Mount with responsibility and consideration, while maintaining freedom of worship for Jews on the Mount.” His words were immediately scoured for meaning. Did the prime minister intend to imply that now Jews would have freedom of prayer on the Mount? After all, his language highlighted a striking fact: that in the Jewish state, the only faith members who cannot worship at its holiest site in the country are the Jews. Could this ultimate inequity suddenly disappear?

But soon after, the prime minister’s office issued a statement amending Bennett’s original one, and Yair Lapid—who is not of Bennett’s party and does not share his ideological or religious convictions—assured the Kingdom of Jordan that no change in the status quo would take place. Then Lapid went further. “Jews

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have freedom to visit Temple Mount and Muslims have freedom of worship there," he said. “If Jews wish to pray, the holiest place for Jews is a few meters from there—the Western Wall.”

This is preposterous. The Western Wall, or “Kotel,” is the retaining wall of the Temple Plaza from the Herodian age. It acquired its special status because it was the one site where Jews were allowed by the Ottomans to gather in yearning for the Temple itself, and to mourn its destruction. The Kotel is the place where Jews for centuries gathered...to affirm that the Temple Mount is Judaism's holiest site.

Worse was yet to come. What began as an inelegant attempt at diplomacy would soon descend into farce. Meirav Ben-Ari, a member of Knesset and of Lapid's Yesh Atid Party, was asked on Israeli television about Lapid's comments. “Is it also your opinion,” queried the journalist “that the Kotel is the holiest site for Jews?”

“Barur,” she crisply replied—“but of course.” The interviewer pressed: “Not the Temple Mount?” Ben-Ari reiterated her party leader's line: “The Kotel is the holiest site for the Jewish people.” Again, following up, the interviewer asked: “More than then the Temple Mount?”

“Ani lo osah taharat,” Ben-Ari said, which means: “I am not making a competition.”

It is not clear, of course, what this signified. Does Ben-Ari believe that the Kotel is Judaism's holiest site, or doesn't she? As the puzzled reporter asked how Ben-Ari could ignore “our fundamental history as a people,” she stuck by the party leader's line: “Zo daati vezo amadati.” Meaning: “This is my opinion and this is my position.”

The application of this fascinating phrase to denying historical fact—my opinion and my position—comes perilously close to the postmodern penchant for “speaking one's truth.” Thus did a politician—who is not a historian, theologian, or Judaic scholar of any kind—summarily redefine the Jewish faith. Thus was the Ninth of Av followed by governmental figures denying all that Jews have mourned on that day.

Ultimately the problem with statements such as these is not their ignorance but that they give ammunition to enemies of Israel, who seek to lie about Jewish history. The hard truth is that in the past 54 years since the miraculous moment when Jews returned to ancient Jerusalem, the sacred city has itself been rebuilt—but the destruction of the remnants of the Temple has gotten worse. The waqf has destroyed much archeological evidence of the Temple that once was there, and many Palestinian leaders have denied that the Temple stood there in the first place. To say on television that the Western Wall is Judaism's holiest site is to provide propaganda to those who seek to negate the Jewish connection to Jerusalem.

The episode is another reminder that the Jewish return to Jerusalem in 1967 marked one of the most miraculous moments in the history of the Jewish people, but it is also the anniversary of Israel's greatest mistake. The victory in the Six-Day War could have been a moment to establish what Prime Minister Bennet rightly called “freedom of worship” on the Mount, a moment to enshrine the right for Jews to pray there as much as Muslims. But that moment was missed by Moshe Dayan, and the situation is very different today.

For those who care deeply about the Jewish connection to the Mount, and who desperately desire to pray there, it may well be that today it will be achieved first and foremost with finesse. A recent Israeli news report described how Israeli police are allowing visiting Jews on the Mount to pray—to do so quietly, unofficially, without the usual accoutrements such as prayer shawls and phylacteries, but to pray nonetheless. One of the unsung heroes of the surreptitious step forward seems to be Gilad Erdan, the outgoing Israeli ambassador to Washington, who will be staying on as Israel’s representative in the UN. Until recently the Israeli police atop the Mount would stop any Jewish act that came close to prayer, at times protesting even if a tour guide quoted the Bible. But the Jerusalem Post described how Erdan, while serving as Israel’s minister for public security, deliberately oversaw personnel changes to the police, ensuring that they “softened their attitude to Jewish visitors and did not remove those engaged in small, discreet Jewish prayer services from the site.”

Meanwhile, the government of Israel owes it to its citizens, and thousands of years of Jewish history, to state unequivocally that the Temple Mount, and not the Western Wall, is the locus of Jewish longing.
WE HAVE been through a trying national trauma since the beginning of 2020—one of the gravest public-health calamities in our country’s history and a governing challenge more daunting than any we have seen in peacetime since the Great Depression. The sheer scale and intensity of it all make it difficult to step back and take stock. And it isn’t over yet.

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But we face an even more fundamental obstacle to serious analysis. We will have trouble learning lessons from our pandemic experience because we live in a time of unremitting negativity about America on all sides of our culture and politics. All we can see is what is wrong with our country, and you can’t learn much if you aren’t willing to acknowledge successes alongside failures.

To be sure, our response to the pandemic offers no shortage of failures to criticize. More than 600,000 Americans have so far been killed by the virus, and a better national response could surely have kept that number lower. The early rollout of testing was horribly botched. Public-health officials were repeatedly caught distorting what they knew in an effort to manipulate the public’s behavior, or caught allowing political priorities to twist their advice in ways that made them hard to take seriously. Elected officials frequently played to the crowd to generate clickbait rather than trying to lead by interpreting the available facts. Former president Donald Trump was unsteady, unfocused, uninformed, and often unthinkably irresponsible at the helm of the federal bureaucracy. And our society quickly polarized its understanding of the crisis, with views about risks and responses, the effectiveness of particular drugs, the usefulness of masks, the value of vaccines, and more, all following partisan lines rather than evidence.

That very polarization helps explain why we see only failures when we consider America’s pandemic response. Half the country thinks the response revealed that the right is America’s biggest problem, as evident in a rejection of science and expertise and a resistance to collective action that supposedly have amounted to a deadly selfishness. The other half thinks we learned that the left is the country’s chief problem, as evident in a corrupt elite that recklessly politicized expertise, needlessly shut down the economy, and seized upon a national emergency to tighten its grip on every form of power. Whatever you make of those views, they aren’t really lessons of the pandemic. Rather, they are the prejudices we all brought with us to the pandemic. We have eagerly seized upon some ways in which they were affirmed over the past year and a half, but that is no way to make sense of reality.

So what if, without denying any of these failures, we tried instead to begin by learning something from America’s successes in responding to the virus? Our first instinct may be to say “what successes?” But in fact, the United States has done some crucial things very well. And it seems our successes are closely connected to our failures.

The particular way in which America mobilizes in emergencies—not through focused civic discipline, but through immense exertions of power, money, and energy—helps explain both why we often seem inept and rudderless at first in the face of major challenges and why we often ultimately achieve astonishing practical feats in taking them on. It is also why we frequently fail to give our country credit for its triumphs. Seeing what we got right will therefore also help us see more clearly, and in a less partisan way, what we got wrong and what we might do to better handle serious crises in the future.
**WE DID NO WORSE**

AMERICA’S EXPERIENCE of the pandemic does not actually stand out as a failure in comparative terms. It has certainly been much more painful than the experiences of the Asian democracies, but it has broadly resembled that of much of the developed West. The cumulative number of COVID deaths in the U.S. relative to our population amounted to just over 1,800 deaths per million people as of the summer of 2021. That’s a lot lower than in Italy, a little lower than in the United Kingdom and Poland, and a little higher than in France and Spain. Canada did a good bit better than we did by this measure, but Belgium did a good bit worse. The same basic picture emerges when you consider the other key indicators of the severity of the crisis, such as caseloads and hospitalizations, relative to population. In terms of outcomes, our country has not stood out from the pack.

Even in areas where we began as a stand-out failure, most notably testing, we quickly made up ground. As of March 31, 2020, the United States had run only four tests per thousand residents—far below the rate of much of Europe and Asia. All we could talk about back then was how efficient South Korea’s testing regime was and why we were so far behind. But the U.S. actually surpassed South Korea’s cumulative per capita level of testing by the middle of April 2020 and soon raced ahead of all the Asian democracies and most of Europe. The sense that our testing regime was an embarrassing disaster had become deeply ingrained by then, and we continued to argue about whether it was the fault of Donald Trump, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or whoever our least favorite governor might be—even as the United States was rapidly becoming a world leader on this front. Our poor start had grave costs, to be sure, but it was not the whole story.

That pattern has a lot to tell us about America’s performance more generally. Again and again, as circumstances evolved or our understanding of the virus changed, our first response to a new challenge was chaotic and overwhelmed. Our politics fell into arguing about whose fault it was—even as the country was mobilizing and taking on the problem with gusto and ultimately with success. Be it around the near-collapse of New York City’s health system at the outset of the crisis, supply disruptions and shortages in the spring of 2020, the economic hardships many Americans soon faced, the challenges of remote schooling, or the development and distribution of vaccines, early difficulties led to a perception of failure that defined our mood even as those difficulties were decisively overcome.

This has kept us from appreciating the magnitude of some of our country’s achievements, and seeing where we have run well ahead of the pack. It somehow feels wrong to speak of congressional effectiveness, for instance. But the United States clearly mounted the boldest, largest, and most effective response in the world to the economic calamities that accompanied the pandemic.

That response, too, started with pandemonium and despair. As economic activity began to shut down in early March, pressure mounted on Congress both to support the public-health response and to provide some relief to individuals and businesses seeing their incomes and revenues collapse. But the Democratic House and Republican Senate were bogged down in partisan rancor, and President Trump wavered between dismissing the danger of the virus and fanning fear about it. Two early measures, enacted on March 6, and March 18, were small and unfocused, and they mostly intensified the sense of incapacity in Washington. As a third measure began to take shape, most observers were struck by how inept the process seemed. Several failed attempts to win 60 Senate votes for the bill only added to that sense.

And yet, that third measure—the CARES Act—got wrapped up and signed into law by March 27. It was the largest emergency-spending measure in the history of the U.S. government, and it was relatively well directed. The bill spent $2.2 trillion on assistance to individuals, unemployment benefits, help to businesses, and support for state and local governments. Over the following year, Congress followed that up with three more bipartisan measures—none quite as large as CARES but all gigantic by any normal measure, and each geared to filling some gaps left by the others.

By the middle of 2021, the United States had spent more than $5 trillion on its pandemic response, in coordination with an aggressive monetary response from the Federal Reserve. The scale of that effort dwarfed those of other developed economies: It was about 50 percent larger than Britain’s total pandemic economic measures, and more than three times the size of the response of the French, Italians, and Spanish (relative to their economies). And the spending was generally rooted in the reasonable principle that, in a pandemic recession, policymakers should focus on helping those who have lost income rather than spurring aggregate demand.

The result was far from perfect, but it would have to be described as an enormous success. The pandemic had brought about the sharpest and deepest economic contraction since the Great Depression, with unemployment skyrocketing by more than 10 percent-
We have stood out most. Our country’s long record of enormous public investments in academic medical research—including especially the generational investment in the Human Genome Project beginning two decades ago—made the development of the innovative mRNA vaccines possible. And the vast infrastructure of small and large pharmaceutical firms drawing on the genius of America’s great research universities created the conditions for a swift response to a new and unfamiliar virus.

The vaccine story has been, at its essence, an American story.

The genome of the virus was first made public in China on January 11, 2020. The American pharmaceutical company Moderna, working with federal researchers from the National Institutes of Health, produced the first doses of an mRNA vaccine to protect against the virus two days later, on January 13. By late February, the NIH was launching a Phase 1 clinical study; the first study participant received a shot in his arm on March 16, 2020. Several other companies soon began their own parallel vaccine-development efforts. Nothing even close to this pace of development and testing had ever been seen before.

The Trump administration, with backing from Congress, quickly moved to provide the resources necessary to support this unprecedented scale and pace of research and to prepare a distribution effort to follow it. What came to be called “Operation Warp Speed” set out to enable the development, testing, approval, manufacture, and distribution of an effective COVID vaccine within a year. The federal government would pre-purchase enough doses to vaccinate every American, taking the financial risks upon the taxpayer and freeing the pharmaceutical companies to move fast. Congress allotted 10 billion dollars to the task, but it was clear that if the work required more, then more would be forthcoming. There was no shortage of skepticism, yet thanks to the unprecedented sense of urgency and to the open spigot of dollars in Washington, things moved with astonishing rapidity. Three American-made vaccines were approved and ready for distribution by the end of 2020.

Then the distribution followed the same familiar pattern as every other element of the American response: overwhelmed pandemonium leading to intense and highly politicized criticism soon overcome by the sheer scale of mobilization on the ground.

The effort began as a massive bottleneck, leading to far slower early distribution than the Trump administration had promised. As Politico’s Rachel Roubein reported on New Year’s Eve, “the calendar will flip over into 2021 with the U.S. well short of its goal of vaccinating 20 million Americans against the coronavirus.” State and federal officials struggled to define the highest-priority groups for vaccination—the elderly? frontline workers? teachers?—while healthcare providers and seniors struggled with crashing appointment websites, and local health officials had no answers to offer. The president-elect soon joined the chorus of complainers. “If it continues to move as it is now, it’s going to take years, not months, to vaccinate the American people,” Biden told reporters on December 30. And he promised that his administration would accelerate the pace of vaccination to a million shots a day.

That might have seemed like an ambitious vow in those early and chaotic days, but in fact that break-
neck pace was achieved before Biden even took office. On January 11, 2021, exactly a year after the genome of the virus was first published and nine days before Biden was sworn in, 1.25 million doses of the vaccine were administered in the United States—crossing the million-shots-a-day mark for the first time. By April, more than 3 million doses were going into arms every day, and by August nearly 350 million doses had been administered in our country.

By that point, just as had happened with the field hospitals prepared but left empty in America’s largest cities early in the pandemic, and with Congress’s financial relief, supply was well exceeding demand. The American response had not only met the moment but exceeded it. And the challenge now on the vaccine front is persuading skeptical Americans to take that free shot.

Both that continuing challenge, which is no small matter, and the character of the original mobilization have tended to leave Americans with a sense that our country has failed even when it has succeeded spectacularly. This is why really learning lessons from the pandemic will require us to focus on what we have done well in order to grasp how to improve on what we have done poorly.

**WE MOBILIZE IN OUR OWN WAY**

These lessons of success add up to a general observation about the nature of what contemporary America does well and poorly in a crisis. A massive societal mobilization in response to an unexpected challenge can take two sorts of forms, broadly speaking: We might call them a mobilization of discipline and a mobilization of capacity.

The first involves rising to the challenge through solidarity, orderly compliance, centralized coordination, and the sacrifice of individual preferences for the common good.

The second involves rising to the challenge through energetic action, the deployment of overwhelming power and money, and the sheer scope and reach of activity.

In theory, a country might excel at both simultaneously; in practice, the two tend to call upon quite different if not contradictory sorts of national characters, and pretty much no one does both well.

The Asian democracies, including South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, proved exceptionally capable at mobilizing discipline in response to the pandemic. They quickly put forward rules of restraint—mandating masks, imposing rigorous surveillance and contact-tracing regimes, isolating even from their own families those who were infected—and their people accepted these rules and abided by them. This was not only very effective but also very impressive. It gave them and us the sense that they had designed an organized, focused response, and it kept caseloads under control.

The United States is just awful at this kind of civic discipline. It isn’t who we are, and it isn’t going to be. Americans did make great sacrifices and show serious restraint to abide by pandemic rules, of course.
People shut down their lives, withdrew from public places, kept away from family and friends, masked their faces, and curtailed their activities. But we did all this unevenly, grudgingly, and only up to a point. Uniform, preventive compliance in response to authority was never in the cards.

I was personally witness to a Zoom conversation early in the spring of 2020 in which a group of public-health academics briefed several members of Congress and their staffs about the techniques South Korea had used to trace COVID outbreaks and to quarantine the infected in special hotels. The briefing was followed by an awkward silence as the elected officials must have imagined themselves trying to sell these techniques to their constituents. There were no questions or comments, but only because everyone was too polite to say what they were thinking: “Are you kidding? That is never going to happen in America.”

Our allergy to this sort of civic discipline lay behind many of our failures in this pandemic. It was why things went sideways every time we needed to listen to an expert, or to act in unison, or to show restraint. Some of this is a function of the hyper-partisan dis-temper that characterizes 21st-century America. But much of it is just the long-standing unruliness of the American people.

Yet that unruliness has always been the opposite side of the coin of America’s greatest strengths. We may be terrible at mobilizing discipline, but no one is better than the United States at mobilizing capacity. We are slow in awakening to action, but once we are awakened, we are capable of unimaginably immense exertions. These are often restive and poorly coordinated, but they are also dynamic, vigorous, and colossal in scope and scale.

This sort of mobilization of capacity often follows a pattern that feeds our tendency to see only the worst about our country these days. America’s first response to a major new challenge is often flat-footed and chaotic. Our government doesn’t have the standing reserve capacity to respond effectively and quickly to large public-health problems or natural disasters. And we wouldn’t really want it to: A government that had that kind of power at its disposal at all times would not be good for our freedom or prosperity. What would it be doing with that power when we weren’t facing a huge crisis?

The absence of standing capacity means it takes us a little time to mobilize, and during that period of mobilization, it feels as if no one is at the helm and nothing is working. The intense transparency enabled by modern media and social media exacerbates this impression, filling one news cycle after another with evidence of dereliction and fodder for recrimination. An impression of ineptitude takes hold. In time, and often fairly quickly, the vast public and private resources of our society do get mobilized and mount a massive and highly impressive response. But the original impression is hard to shake, and by that point, the media have moved on to the next outrage.

This has happened around a number of mobilization efforts in recent decades. The federal government’s response to Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, for instance, was easily the largest and most
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AMERICANS DON'T MOBILIZE into order—we mobilize into action, and our modes of mobilized action are often very disorderly. It’s in our character. Some of our greatest successes in this crisis have come when decision-makers have recognized that fact. The legislative response to the virus was not a set of rules for Americans to follow, but a set of resources for Americans to deploy. The health-system response did not set strict criteria for triage; it built respirators by the thousands and put enormous field hospitals in parks and football stadiums. The vaccine deployment began with a futile attempt to prioritize recipients, but it ultimately succeeded as a vast, chaotic dissemination of doses to every pharmacy and supermarket in the country.

Meanwhile, some of our greatest failures have come when decision-makers have insisted on ignoring the character of our society or blindly wishing it were otherwise. Attempts to manipulate people into behaving with restraint by shading the truth about caseloads, risks, or masks have frequently backfired, and with good reason. The better part of statesmanship is understanding the nature of the people you seek to govern. Technical expertise can never substitute for political judgment on that front, and public-health officials can never substitute for elected leaders who know their voters and who understand what our society does well and poorly.

That kind of self-knowledge should also inform the sorts of changes we make in the wake of this pandemic. We need to think of our emergency-response systems, in public health and otherwise, in terms of enabling the mobilization of capacity. They should be used to hold off disaster until we can get ourselves geared up—like a military built around reserves. Those institutions that can fill in gaps and empower mobilization should be reinforced. And those, such as the Centers for Disease Control, that were built on the premise that they will impose discipline in the early phases of a crisis probably need to be rethought altogether.

We cannot simply resign ourselves to our weaknesses, of course. We do need to improve our ability to marshal some discipline in a crisis, and we need to help our institutions gain more trust. But that can succeed only by recognizing the nature of our society and working from there. We cannot formulate national strategies around the wish that our national character were fundamentally different. We need to build them in light of our real strengths and weaknesses.

As we work to digest and assess America’s pandemic response, we should be careful not to undersell those strengths or overemphasize those weaknesses. The virus posed an immense challenge to every society. No government managed a smooth and effective response. Every nation has seen its vices magnified alongside its virtues. The standard against which we measure our leaders and ourselves needs to take that into account, so it can help us learn and improve. When disaster strikes, we should not expect from our society a tidy and efficient falling into line but a sprawling, messy, sloppy, yet mammoth and effective American mobilization.

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effort. The point of acknowledging these achievements would not be to just pat our country on the back. Our successes do not erase our failures, or even justify them. Our inability to marshal civic discipline has serious costs, and we will continue to face those as we continue to fight the virus. Our vaccination effort, for instance, began to slow horribly after a certain point, as weak demand rather than short supply has become the chief obstacle. Canada and much of Europe had exceeded our vaccination levels by the beginning of August (though our country did reach the goal set by President Biden of vaccinating 70 percent of eligible people just a few weeks after the date he had aimed for). And overcoming vaccine hesitancy calls for a mobilization of discipline more than of capacity. We should not abandon such efforts, bad though we are at them. We can do better at civic discipline.

Seeing more clearly what we are truly great at, however, can help us know where to focus our efforts in this fight and how to prepare for future mobilizations.
9/11, Twenty Years Later

A new book highlights the enduring failure of liberalism’s approach to terrorism

By Brian Stewart

TWENTY YEARS AFTER al-Qaeda launched its most brazen attack on American civil society—or, as some of us conceived of it, on civilization itself—a strategic and historical exhaustion has overtaken American thinking about the War on Terror. The political class and the public have wearied of the moral and martial exertions involved in suppressing violent insurgencies and dispatching holy warriors across the lands of Islam.

Despite the many differences—profound and cosmetic—between the Biden administration and its two immediate predecessors, it’s clear that all sought to pivot away from the Middle East. None attempted to justify a continued American presence in the region. Both parties have shown dwindling patience with the use of American military force and a marked timidity about exercising assertive leadership in the world. The old consensus about America’s role as upholder of global security—tenuous since the end of the Cold War—has collapsed.

But the pronounced unwillingness to defend the country’s interests and advance its ideals in the realms of national security and foreign policy isn’t altogether new. Since the beginning of the 9/11 era, there has been a palpable reluctance in certain quarters to see a vigorous struggle prosecuted against global jihad. Even before the fires in lower Manhattan and at the Pentagon had burned out, a search was in progress—chiefly on the political left but also among an old breed of conservatives—for a way to avoid a serious or prolonged confrontation with the holy warriors as well as the totalitarian movements and regimes giving them succor and support. This dispensation registered itself in opposition to military hostilities, but also to waging ideological warfare with a cult of death that worships suicide and exalts murder and desecration. Much of this early antiwar sentiment, in both its progressive and conservative forms, arose out of a vague but confident belief that a radical band of neoconservatives posed more danger to the nation’s safety and security than theocratic fascists loyal to Osama bin Laden.

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The tyranny of guilt gripping much of the West today has ensured that a degree of obfuscation, sentimentality, and neutralism has never been absent from the public debate over the War on Terror. In the 20 years since September 11, 2001, this tendency has inhibited the formation of a coherent or robust response to the ongoing threat of jihadist terror. It has also enabled a callous indifference to the cause of liberals and minorities in the lands of Islam suffering from identical forces of clerical repression and violence.

In a previous era, the Irish statesman and polymath Conor Cruise O’Brien evolved a penetrating description for this parochial tendency. In his 1977 lecture “Liberty and Terror,” O’Brien called it “unilateral liberalism.” This attitude of mind exhibits, said O’Brien, an acute sensitivity to threats to liberty arising from the actions of democratic states, combined with a curiously phlegmatic attitude to threats to liberty from the enemies of those states.

Liberals of this sort have little idea how to defend a nation from formidable enemies and appear to be blind to the plight of those who live in fear and under oppression on distant shores. The all-consuming but mainly abstract concerns of the unilateral liberals about the erosion of liberty by the Western state seem irrelevant to what imperils liberty in the real world. O’Brien noted the irony of actually diminished liberty going “unmourned by those who defend liberty on one side only.”

Contemporary examples of unilateral liberalism abound, but it achieves its distilled essence in Spencer Ackerman’s new book, Reign of Terror: How the 9/11 Era Destabilized America and Produced Trump. Ackerman, a national security correspondent for the Daily Beast, finds the entire warp and woof of the War on Terror abominable. In his mind, it is nothing more than a phantom conflict concocted by corrupt and wicked elites to enrich the military-industrial complex at the expense of a sullen American public and wretched foreign multitudes.

In Reign of Terror, Ackerman sounds the trumpet that hastily calls retreat from the “Forever Wars.” In calling for the War on Terror to be abolished, he candidly outlines that he means not only “the foreign military deployments, but the broader entrenched architecture of surveillance, detention, immigration suppression, and the rest.”

This is not, as you might be able to guess, a faint or equivocating rebuke to the old American consensus. A few pages into the book, it becomes plain that Ackerman harbors an extreme and frantic concern for the threats to liberty arising from democratic states—America and its principal allies—but can spare nary a word for threats to liberty arising from the enemies of democracy.

It is an article of faith among a large and growing segment of America’s commentariat and governing class that the United States cannot sustain or emerge victorious in a “Forever War.” Ackerman falls squarely in this camp. “The War on Terror,” he avers, “will continue to produce neither peace nor victory.” This safe speculation is repeated so often that he seems to believe it is inherently damning of the position that America and its allies have adopted. But is it? Are either of these conditions—absolute peace or absolute victory—sensible metrics for success in a global confrontation with Islamic militancy? Let’s hope not.

Consider an analogy to the maintenance of local order. It’s no indictment of the police that they do not fully stamp out murder and mayhem in the society they are sworn to protect and serve. Crime and disorder are human perennial, and the police are fairly expected to suppress and punish these malign behaviors, not to eradicate them. Who would imagine that a failure to prevent all crime invalidates the enterprise of criminal justice? Answer: Spencer Ackerman and his ilk. In Reign of Terror, he holds out a similarly preposterous standard for ensuring a modicum of global order while lambasting the American regime where it falls short in that colossal task.

In common with other works in this myopic oeuvre, Reign of Terror places heavy emphasis on America’s sins of commission in the course of the War on Terror while neglecting entirely its sins of omission. The genre hasn’t been strictly “left” or “right” but rather a species of the provincial extreme of each political flank. Ackerman fingers the creed of American exceptionalism as the ideological culprit for the “collateral” harm befalling civilians in this globe-spanning campaign, but his understanding of the concept is not only flawed but grotesque: “America acted. As the
The author’s grasp on American exceptionalism, a complex phenomenon, is inhibited by his prejudice that attributes all historical agency to America, and none at all to others.

global hegemon, it was not acted upon. That assumption was part of a civic religion, as old as the country itself, known as American exceptionalism...which is nothing more than white innocence applied globally.” One needn’t be a scholar of Tocqueville to see that Ackerman’s grasp of this pregnant subject leaves much to be desired.

It can be wearying to wade through the text of Reign of Terror, with its relentless normative arguments against American exceptionalism, or—better put—what Ackerman imagines it to be. But it becomes plain that the author’s grasp on this complex phenomenon is inhibited by his prejudice that attributes all historical agency to America, and none at all to others.

This feature of Reign of Terror is laid bare in its naive treatment of the drone war. The untutored reader will have a better sense of this mode of modern warfare by avoiding the book altogether because the portrait Ackerman paints bears little resemblance to reality. He gives the impression that unmanned aerial vehicles operating in remote areas of delinquent states do more harm than good. The false insinuation is that their attacks are generally inaccurate. So far from consistently laying waste to innocent civilians (and fomenting terrible enmity for the United States), drone strikes are overwhelmingly precise in neutralizing enemy combatants, and they carry fewer human costs than other traditional forms of warfare.

There are exceptions—dreadful exceptions, one need hardly add—that prove the rule. Readers of Reign of Terror are introduced to Faheem Qureshi, a 13-year-old boy from Pakistan’s North Waziristan Province whose family home was destroyed on January 23, 2009, by a Hellfire missile fired from a Predator drone. Unlike two of his uncles and his cousin, the boy survived the attack with shrapnel in his stomach and in his right eye (doctors couldn’t save his left). It was hardly the first or final case of an indiscriminate strike in the drone war, which had become the centerpiece of American counterterrorism strategy in the Obama era. Ackerman quotes a Pakistani journalist, Kareem Khan, whose brothers had been killed in a December 2009 strike (for reasons that are not spelled out): “Anything evil,” Khan said, “you always find America behind it.”

It is proof of the author’s unrestrained animus to American power that he giddily recycles this concentrated paranoia and malevolence, presenting it to readers as gospel truth. He compounds this moral depravity with legal sophistry. “Although the United States was not at war with Pakistan, and no United Nations measure had ever sanctioned missile attacks on its territory, Obama’s lawyers assured him that assaults on suspected members of al-Qaeda and its associated forces fell within the 2001 AUMF, now eight years old.”

Is it the case that U.S. military interventions are lawful and legitimate only if they secure the permission of the parliament of the world? Put differently, do they lack legitimacy if they fail to do so? And is a congressional authorization of military force subject to a fixed deadline? Is eight years too long for a just war but eight months acceptable? Ackerman does not address these obvious and thorny counterpoints, but the logical inference of his critique is that American leaders ought to have pledged to pursue bin Laden to the gates of hell, but only on the dual conditions that the Security Council (with all its talismanic power) approved, and that the journey to justice wouldn’t be too protracted.

However fatuous Ackerman’s narrative, it nonetheless manages to correct some commonplace errors by drawing attention to the bipartisan stewardship that has marked the War on Terror since its inception. Thanks to his unbridled contempt for the “Security State,” and the global hegemony it upholds, Ackerman has no time for the cheap and false evasions of responsibility that once permeated the intellectual left and now defile the anti-intellectual right. He recognizes that the blame for continuing hostilities—if that’s the right word for what is essentially a defensive war—cannot be fixed on a shadowy “deep state,” much less a rogue band of neoconservatives. If there is guilt on this score, it’s a collective one touching almost every member of the governing class.

Beginning in the Bush years, “Democrats sought to make the War on Terror work more rationally.... Whatever discomfort they felt with that effort did not develop into opposition.” Even after Obama’s inauguration, the Democratic Party made no effort to wind down the war—and given the political liability entailed by holding a soft line against terror, it was never going
Although Ackerman’s bill of indictment includes the CIA’s secret prisons and the prison at Guantanamo, he seems particularly incensed by the killing of Anwar al-Awlaki.

(Check for accuracy before proceeding.)

to do so. *Reign of Terror* shows that liberal “complicity” has been a feature without which an indefinite, expanding war could never have been prosecuted with such vigor and for this duration. And yet “liberalism”—consistently used by the author as a term of abuse—“would always be shocked to discover” that enlisting in the war effort “empowered those who wanted America not to be a global police force for undeserving foreigners, but a domestic one guarding the ramparts of American civilization.”

Inadvertently, however, Ackerman demonstrates how untenable winding down this struggle prematurely would be. With remarkable insouciance, he concedes that Pakistan, “like other countries the United States had turned into battlefields, had little interest in suppressing extremists in its own tribal areas” on behalf of a distant hegemon. A fair-minded observer might retort that it would behoove Pakistani authorities to suppress extremists on behalf of their own citizens, regardless of the wishes of a foreign state. In any case, the United States is surely less responsible for the burning grounds of the Hindu Kush than are al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and their Pakistani paymasters who not only refuse to suppress extremists but insist on supporting them to the hilt.

Although Ackerman’s bill of indictment includes the CIA’s black-site secret prisons (shut down by Barack Obama in the first week of his presidency) and the prison at Guantanamo (which Obama failed to close after promising to do so), he seems particularly incensed by the killing of Anwar al-Awlaki. For him, “a constitutional Rubicon” was crossed when the Obama administration decided to kill this American citizen without trial after he had taken up arms against his country.

_Ackerman contends_ that the war America has been provoked to wage—the war declared against America and its citizens, civilian and military—could be neither sustained nor ended. The logical inference is that it should never have been initiated, or joined. Obviously, this prospect could never have been faced with equanimity, and so Ackerman never brings himself to state it outright.

Early in his tale, Ackerman quotes a bin Laden communiqué that reproaches America for “occupying the lands of Islam in its holiest of places.” He continues in his own voice to parrot bin Laden’s view that “since it underwrote the world order, America was ultimately responsible for the cheapness of Muslim life worldwide: the Iraqis it starved and bombed; all those tortured and slain by America’s allies...; and even the deaths caused by American rivals or enemies.” Instead of countering that morally depraved narrative—what about the innumerable Muslims from Kuwait to Bosnia whose suffering was alleviated by American power?—Ackerman leaves it alone. This reviewer was decidedly uncertain whether it was intended to be only bin Laden’s judgment or Ackerman’s as well.

Later on, Ackerman warms to his theme that U.S. foreign policy—having turned the trauma of 9/11...
“outward onto the world”—fortified the jihadist narrative about American malice and weakness. “Bush was showing the Muslim world the America that bin Laden depicted: both a bloodthirsty oppressor and a vulnerable one.”

It isn’t clear how dethroning retrograde governments and degrading terrorist movements while laying the foundations of democracy in the Middle East constitutes a thirst for blood, but this isn’t the actual focus of Reign of Terror. Whatever rage is mustered on behalf of the victims, and targets, of American imperialism, the source of Ackerman’s bile isn’t really to be found on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan, or Pakistan, or Yemen, or Somalia, or Libya, or Syria, or Niger. It lies instead with what he imagines that war has done on the home front—a predictable feature in such a strikingly solipsistic book. “Fundamentally the war was always home.... Of all the endless costs of terrorism, the most important is the least tallied: what fighting it has cost our democracy.”

Of all the explanations for the rise of Trump, Reign of Terror offers among the most tedious and least substantiated of the lot. Ackerman expressly argues that the War on Terror incubated a populist nationalism that Trump initially fed in to and was in turn fed by. The themes of the Trump presidency, this argument runs, at once preceded and will endure long after the deaths of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Osama bin Laden, and Omar al-Baghdadi. Donald Trump, with his chauvinism and xenophobia, “was the War or Terror’s lagging indicator, the promise of what George W. Bush unleashed and what Barack Obama nurtured.” It follows that until this “Forever War” is terminated, “it will propel itself toward greater domestic destabilization.” The United States, in this view, continues to unleash destruction “not only on the world but on itself.”

It must be said that this narrative frame is erroneous—delusional, even. Unless it is shaken off, it will not only inhibit our understanding of how we reached this juncture, but it will inhibit our ability to escape it. The appearance of populist nationalism in American politics is by no means an exclusively American phenomenon. If Trump merely followed where George W. Bush and Obama led, as Ackerman suggests, then what can explain Brexit? There are nastier versions of populist nationalism on offer across the European continent. How does the prison at Guantanamo, or CIA black sites, explain the rise of the Swedish Democrats or the National Front in France?

And still the biggest question of all remains: If the drone war and the obsessive focus on counterterrorism stir populist nationalism, how was the populist rebellion quelled (at least for a time) in November 2020? This happened despite Trump’s decision, in Ackerman’s words, to make the War on Terror “great again” by “intensifying aerial bombing campaigns across multiple war zones.” If endless war was a leading factor stoking populist resentment, one might have thought America would have never found its way back to something like political normalcy before it terminated hostilities.

Another curiosity is why the authoritarian populist rebellion has been quelled only here. Ackerman never asks, because the intricate economic and social phenomena that truly account for the rise of Trump is largely omitted from his telling. And, as a booster of the political career of Bernie Sanders, Ackerman does not believe much political progress has been made simply by seeing off Trump. It remains interesting that while other established democracies have succumbed to the political contagion of our times, America has managed to inoculate itself, at least for now. But it’s an inconvenient achievement for the dour and fanatical enemies of the endless wars who cannot change their mind and cannot change the subject. Perhaps Ackerman’s shallow treatment of America’s political evolution comes down to the fear that Trump’s ouster gives some force to that quaint old notion of American exceptionalism he so deplores.

“The War on Terror fit within American traditions of settler colonialism,” Ackerman concludes. In the national myth, as he tells it, it was “a white man with a flag and a gun” who “had made America great,” and this image was ostensibly repurposed in the war against jihadism. In the 9/11 era, Ackerman continues, that white man would become the world’s premier “counterterrorist.” This equation of America with whiteness was always profoundly ahistorical, and it left Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, and James Baldwin scratching their heads since the American character is intrinsically a composite identity. But in recent decades, racist theories of nationhood held even less
purchase against the backdrop of America’s stunning moral advances in the realm of human equality. The war against jihadism, involving allied forces of various nations and ethnic backgrounds, was no exception. This campaign was a struggle to defend civilization from religious barbarism, and not by any means an exclusively “white man’s burden.”

This nuanced and textured understanding of the continuing necessity of the battle against terrorism has fallen out of fashion in both parties today. It was former Obama aide Ben Rhodes who declared that the pandemic has created an opportunity to reorient America’s role in the world. “This is not simply a matter of winding down the remaining 9/11 wars,” he said. “We need a transformation of what has been our whole way of looking at the world since 9/11.” Doubtless many Trump Republicans would agree.

The view that the War on Terror has deformed America into an evil empire while eroding its republican character is parochial. The suspicion that America cannot be at once a flawed democracy and a robust force for freedom smacks of the very Manicheanism that the anti-warriors discern in their neoconservative and neoliberal rivals. This culminates in Ackerman’s breathtakingly myopic final flourish that it is “difficult to see America as anything more than its War on Terror.” In a sprawling republic making vast strides toward a more perfect union while a troubled world still yearns for American leadership, what could be a more thorough demonstration of American innocence?

The usefulness of such innocence in the lingering confrontation with clerical fanaticism in large swaths of the Islamic world has still never been demonstrated.
New York City’s Kristallnacht

Remembering the horror of Crown Heights 30 years later

By Edward Kosner

D KOCH CALLED it “a pogrom.” So did Rudy Giuliani. The Reverend Al Sharpton—the chubby, agitating, last-century version—led a march along the streets as rioting young blacks rampaged through the neighborhood looking for Jews and Jewish businesses to attack. Hasidim cowered behind their mezuzah-trimmed doors while the sluggish police ducked rocks and bottles. New York’s first African-American mayor, the courtly David Dinkins, showed up, hoisted a bullhorn, and tried to pacify the mob.

“Will you listen to me for just a minute?” he pleaded.


“No!” they responded, trying to stone him.

“I care about you. I care about you desperately,” he shouted.

“Arrest the Jews!” they demanded.

That was the raw scene 30 years ago, in August 1991, when the worst race rioting in modern New York memory engulfed Crown Heights in Brooklyn. Caribbean immigrants, American blacks, and Hispanics shared the neighborhood with a heavily outnumbered community of Jews, most of them Lubavitcher Hasidim. The convulsive episode drove Dinkins’s hand-picked black police commissioner back to Houston and helped doom his mayoralty, but not before that commissioner’s successor, Ray Kelly, began to reenergize the police force. This, in turn, gave momentum to Rudy Giuliani’s more muscular regime once he had defeated Dinkins in the mayoral election two years later.

Even today, many of the details about the traffic
accident that touched off the riot and its deadly aftermath are in dispute, despite a 656-page investigatory report commissioned by Governor Mario Cuomo that was released two years after the event. The question for the future is whether Crown Heights was a one-time, perfect-storm explosion—or possibly an augury for Jews.

When Crown Heights erupted, I had been the editor of *New York* magazine for more than a decade. There had been flickerings of trouble between blacks and Jews before, but nothing on its ferocious scale. Some friction was inevitable because for decades poor blacks had done much of their food and clothing shopping at stores owned and run by Jews, lived in tenements owned or managed by Jews, and often worked as maids or janitors in Jewish homes and apartment houses. To be sure, many liberal New York Jews had been active in the civil-rights movement, contributing to the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, journeying south as freedom riders, and—as in the case of Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman—dying for the cause at the hands of Dixie racists. But it was also true that some working-class Jews closer to them geographically and on the social ladder lived in fear of blacks or condescended to them.

Crown Heights was not the only black-Jewish controversy of 1991. There was the matter of Leonard Jeffries, an outspoken Afro-centrist who was the chairman of the black-studies department at City College’s concrete campus in West Harlem. Jeffries had a litany of accusations against the Jews, among them that they had helped finance the slave trade and made movies that hurt and demeaned blacks, who were (he said) “sun” people, not malign “ice” people like Jews, Italians, Irish, and other whites. That Jeffries did his demagouging at CCNY (my alma mater) was especially inflammatory because the all-but-free college had for years been a beacon for smart young Jewish students unwelcome in the Ivy League or too poor to pay a private college’s tuition.

Jeffries was stripped of his department chairmanship despite a fervent defense from Al Sharpton—himself fresh from the notoriety he earned for his

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stewardship of Tawana Brawley, a black teenager who falsely claimed she had been raped by a white man. Sharpton identified the rapist as Steven Pagones, a local district attorney. Pagones later sued and won a defamation case against Sharpton, Brawley, and another rabble-rouser named Alton Maddox—who declared in a speech that New York State attorney general Robert Abrams, a Jew, had masturbated to Brawley’s photo. Such was the tone of the time.

Sharpton figured in a later incident at a clothing store run by a Jewish businessman on West 125th Street, Harlem’s main commercial strip. In 1995, a black Pentecostal church that owned the property on which Fred Harari operated Freddie’s Fashion Mart asked him to evict his subtenant, a record store run by a black South African. Harari tried to comply, whereupon Sharpton led protests at the store over the planned eviction and because Harari had no black employees. “We will not stand by and allow them to move this brother,” he shouted, “so that some white interloper can expand his business.” It didn’t seem to matter that the “white interloper” had been told to evict the black tenant by the store’s black church owners. Within a few days, a black man set fire to the store. The arsonist stood by the only exit with a revolver, shot at two cops, and hit four customers trying to flee the flames. Later, firemen found seven others who had been trapped in the building dead of smoke inhalation.

But it was Crown Heights that really resonated throughout the city—and resonates today. “It was a riot not by victims of racism, but by racists, an attack on Jews because they were Jews,” wrote Philip Gourevitch in Commentary two years afterward. One academic researcher pronounced it “the worst anti-Semitic incident in American history.”

The nightmare began prosaically. Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the then-89-year-old leader of the Lubavitcher Hasidim, would travel to Queens to visit the grave of his wife each week. For the ride from his home in Crown Heights and back, the police routinely
provided security, including an unmarked lead car with lights flashing. Schneerson had been under police protection since the 1960s to shield him from possible attack from rival Satmar Hasidim.

Schneerson's young disciples vied with one another for the honor of escorting the small motorcade in their own cars. At 8:20 P.M. on August 19, 1991, Yosef Lifsh, a 22-year-old rabbinical student, was trailing Schneerson's car back from the gravesite heading west on President Street. As the first two cars passed the Utica Avenue intersection, the traffic light changed. Trying to keep up, Lifsh accelerated through—depending on who is telling the story—a yellow or a red light and hit another automobile. Lifsh's car careened across the intersection, mounted the curb, and slammed into seven-year-old Gavin Cato and his cousin, Angelo Cato, also seven. Gavin, the child of Guyanese immigrants, was pinned under the car, his blood mixing with oil leaking from the wreck. His cousin was badly hurt.

Lifsh testified to a grand jury later that he then jumped from the car to try to help Gavin but was seized by a crowd of black youths who pummeled him as he tried to call for help on his cellphone. A community ambulance sponsored by Orthodox Jews pulled up and hustled Lifsh and his passengers away—on orders from the police, it was claimed, to remove the target of the growing tension. Moments later, city ambulances arrived and took the Cato children to the hospital, where Gavin was pronounced dead.

False rumors quickly spread through the neighborhood, including that Lifsh had been drunk and didn't have a driver's license. Young blacks on the streets started throwing rocks and bottles, and around 11 P.M., someone was said to have shouted, “Let’s go to Kingston Avenue”—a predominantly Jewish street—and get a Jew.” In less than an hour, a score of black teenagers surrounded a 29-year-old Orthodox doctoral student from Australia named Yankel Rosenbaum. They stabbed him in the back and fractured his skull. Rosenbaum died soon afterward at Kings County Hospital, possibly because emergency-room doctors missed one of the stab wounds. But before he died, Rosenbaum identified 16-year-old Lemrick Nelson Jr. as one of his attackers.

Rioters—many as young as 13 and 14 years old—ravaged the neighborhood for three nights. ‘Kill the Jews,’ they shouted. ‘Hitler didn’t do his job.’

Rioters—many as young as 13 and 14—ravaged the neighborhood for the next three nights. “Kill the Jews,” they shouted. “Hitler didn’t do his job.” And: “Get the cops.” One of the mayor’s own community-liaison staffers—a white man—was knocked unconscious with a brick and his car destroyed. Police swarmed the area but were uncharacteristically passive. They separated the blacks and Jews but did little to suppress the violence except pant fruitlessly after the speedy Nike-shod black teens. Ray Kelly was then the chief deputy to Dinkins’s African-American police commissioner, Lee Brown, who came to the job from Houston and spent so much time away from police headquarters that he was known derisively as “Out-of-Town Brown.”

In his 2016 memoir, Vigilance, Kelly writes: “I think the police officials were all trying to second-guess the city’s racial politics” under a black mayor and commissioner and with another black police official in charge of operations. “Some people said the police commanders were trying to read the political risks to their own careers. The biggest danger, police commanders may have calculated, was overreacting on the street. So they hardly reacted at all.”

When Dinkins and Brown returned to Crown Heights on the third night of the riots, the commissioner’s own cruiser, code-named “Car One,” was trapped by the mob and stoned. Kelly, who had previously been a precinct commander in the neighborhood but was then an administrator with no line responsibility, heard the alarm back at headquarters and rushed to the scene. Brown asked him to take over. Kelly brought in 50 mounted police, a convoy of paddy wagons, and new tactics to seal off the streets and capture the rioters. The siege of Crown Heights was over. But not the recriminations. “In his eulogy for the dead child,” Joe Klein wrote of Sharpton in the next issue of New York, he “placed Gavin Cato in a heavenly pantheon of the victims of white-racist violence. God had assured the Reverend Al that Gavin was up in Heaven’s playbook. ‘They introduced him to the four little girls who got killed in Birmingham…and don’t worry, Yusuf Hawkins and Michael Griffith,* they’re baby-sitting…They’re gonna bring him over and introduce him to his uncle Malcolm [X].’” Klein added: “Never mind that Uncle Malcolm was a victim of black-sectarian violence.”

* Hawkins and Griffith were black youths who had been murdered by white mobs in New York City outerborough neighborhoods in the 1980s.
Despite the uproar, a grand jury found no cause to charge Lifsh, an outcome consistent with those in other such traffic accidents. A criminal-court jury exonerated Lemrick Nelson Jr. of fatally stabbing Yankel Rosenbaum after the prosecution was mishandled by the authorities. Lifsh fled the U.S. and literally became a wandering Jew, taking refuge in Canada, Israel, and Russia. Al Sharpton flew into Ben Gurion airport a month after the riots and tried to serve Lifsh with papers in a $100 million wrongful-death suit brought by Cato’s parents. A group of Orthodox Jews recognized Sharpton at the airport. “Go to hell,” they shouted. “I’m already there. I’m in Israel,” Sharpton is reported to have replied. He flew home in a few hours when he failed to serve Lifsh and couldn’t get U.S. diplomats to do it.

Three decades on, many of those involved in the Crown Heights controversy are gone, including Dinkins and his predecessor, Ed Koch. Rudy Giuliani has succeeded Roy Cohn as Donald Trump’s aggressive fixer, although without Cohn’s chutzpah and skill. But Ray Kelly and Al Sharpton are still around to reflect on the episode. Kelly told me the NYPD learned from the Crown Heights fiasco, in which 152 cops and 38 civilians were hurt. The department developed far more effective disorder-control training and tactics, he says, but during his tenure, Mayor Bill de Blasio has discarded that approach. So when mass protests and violence erupted in the city in May 2020 after the killing of George Floyd, the cops struggled to contain the chaos. “If you ignore the lessons of the past, you’re doomed to repeat them,” Kelly says. “You have to keep learning them.” Kelly thinks the next mayor, almost certainly the African-American former police captain Eric Adams, should take on the City Council to end the “reform” restrictions that hobble the police today. “They’re not protecting the public,” he says. “They’re protecting their pensions.”

Sharpton is still sensitive to the criticism that he was a rabble-rouser in Crown Heights, not someone who led a peaceful march after Gavin Cato’s funeral. He says now that he was reflecting the feelings of the Cato family and “the community” when the driver was not held to account—and hasn’t been to this day. He thinks that black-Jewish tensions in the neighborhood have eased considerably, but that there is still friction and that Eric Adams should focus on conciliation.

Serious crime in Crown Heights has dropped more than 75 percent since the riots occurred. Citywide, anti-Semitic incidents have increased significantly. Serious crime in the two precincts that constitute Crown Heights has diminished more than 75 percent in the years since the riots—although Kelly cautions that the way the statistics are now compiled may make the picture brighter than it actually is. Citywide, anti-Semitic incidents have increased significantly, with a late spike after the recent missile exchanges between Israel and Hamas based in Gaza. The perpetrators in these cases appear to be Muslim New Yorkers. African-Americans are involved in about a third of anti-Semitic hate crimes in New York these days, according to police figures. Video footage has also captured several incidences of surprise attacks on Orthodox Jews, suddenly beaten in the streets by black men after having been targeted because of their distinctive dress.

Still, 30 years after their mini Kristallnacht, the Jews of Crown Heights feel more secure. “Times have changed and they have changed for the better,” says Rabbi Jacob Goldstein, a state housing official and former head of Community Board 9 in Brooklyn. The Jewish community, which was concentrated south of Eastern Parkway, has expanded deeply into streets largely dominated by blacks at the time of the riot, going north of that thoroughfare and into East Flatbush. And, despite the pandemic, the area is thriving economically.

He agrees with Sharpton that relations between the Jews and the blacks have significantly improved. “There will always be tensions,” he says. “We don’t break bread together because we are who we are. Are there incidents? There are. But you don’t have what we had. God is looking out for us.”

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Serious crime in Crown Heights has dropped more than 75 percent since the riots occurred. Citywide, anti-Semitic incidents have increased significantly.
Uninformed Consent: The Transgender Crisis

Children cannot make these choices and should be protected from them

By Paul McHugh and Gerard V. Bradley

ILLFUL ARGUMENTS are gaining favor today over rational ones, as revealed by the clamor to provide “affirmative” support to those making transgender claims. Despite the given character of one’s sexual makeup, with its biological intelligibility and its natural place in every individual’s life, American culture has become ever more open to the idea that a person’s sex is mostly a matter of what he or she wants it to be.

Specifically, the champions of the transgender campaign rest their arguments on an essentially solipsistic view (“my truth”) that endorses the individual’s will, sense, or sentiments rather than on what is demonstrably real. The posture extends far into today’s bureaucratic culture. Many official surveys and job applications do not ask whether you are male or female, but rather with which gender you identify. In business and academic settings, it is fashionable to signal support for the transgender cause by adding to one’s own signature a parenthesis enclosing “my preferred pronouns” listing them as “he, his, him” or “she, hers, her” or even “they, theirs, them.” Note that “identify” and “prefer” are words linked to will, wants, and desires, as distinct from those such as “am” and “is,” which are linked to being, nature, and existence.

This cast of mind extends even to supporting the willfulness of prepubescent children (ages 8 to 14), supposing for them not only a right to decide on their sex but the still more radical right to demand and gain the medical and surgical procedures (“affirmative treatment”) to shape their bodies to match their
These treatments tamper recklessly with complicated, incompletely understood neurobiological mechanisms crucial in human physical and personal maturation.

wishes and presumptions.

This extension of the cultural supposition about transgenderism to include the medico-surgical treatment of youngsters is the subject of intense debate and legal argument across America. Arkansas legislators in April enacted (over the governor's veto) a law banning “gender transition services” for any transgender individual under the age of 18, believing such persons too young to provide sound “informed” consent. Substantial scientific evidence supports this view.

But before it could take effect in July, four families of gender-dysphoric children and two doctors (with the help of the American Civil Liberties Union) challenged the law, alleging that it lacks any foundation in science. The truth is quite to the contrary.

Indeed, in a legal brief filed in support of the Arkansas law, the attorneys general of 17 other states wrote, “States have been forced to step in to protect kids from [these] experimental treatments. The medical establishment has abandoned the field to the political zeitgeist” and, we would add, has abandoned as well the evidence-based practice of medicine.

The specific “services” made illegal for young people in Arkansas are those prescribing a sequence of medications that, first, block the development of natural puberty in a maturing boy or girl. That is followed then by a regimen of testosterone or estrogen (“cross-sex hormones”) to provoke some of the post-pubertal physical features of a member of the opposite sex (breast development in boys, facial hair and deep-pitched voice in girls.)

Three individuals (two physicians and one medical student) who are providing such treatments to children in Michigan condemned the Arkansas law in the May 19, 2021, issue of the New England Journal of Medicine. They claimed that the law endorsed bad medical policy because it (and similar laws under debate in other states) “is not based on data, medical literature, or correct information about the process of treating transgender adolescents.”

But the “affirmative treatments” these doctors promote (and that the Arkansas law prohibits) have frail foundations. One of the papers to which they turn for support specifically identifies the strength of the evidence of success for these treatments as “low.” In fact, for these radical treatments, no satisfactory controlled study has even begun. Much less are there any findings from such a study in any peer-reviewed publication. Few of the young people being “affirmatively treated” in “gender clinics” around the country are being systematically assessed before treatment, and few are being closely followed afterward.

The “gender transition services” rejected by the Arkansas law are socio-psychological experiments on children. These pharmaceutical interventions have grave, life-altering consequences, the benefits of which many dispute. One explanation for this state of affairs is supplied by the leader of the Johns Hopkins Center for Transgender Health. She claims there is no need to investigate the value of affirmative interventions for transgender children because, she asserts, “clinical experience” has satisfactorily answered such questions. Evidently, many of her young patients respond positively, at least early in their treatments. But that hardly makes these experiments a success, since early responses do not necessarily presage long-term satisfaction or benefit.

All these clinicians seem to embrace such positive anecdotes because they fit a solipsistic ideology according to which a person’s understanding or imagined projection of oneself as male or female is all that matters, even if one is 11 years old. The Michigan authors who criticized the Arkansas law put their cards on the table by asserting that “each person has their [sic] own gender journey” to make.

Doubts about these treatments persist among relatives and friends of many of the young subjects. These doubters wonder whether other psychological issues may not be behind this emerging surge of gender dysphoria, especially in girls. They sense that their loved ones are being misled and will suffer rather than benefit from these physically transformative treatments. They are justified in their fears not least because many of the facts about human nature and its biological development are being ignored with these procedures.

The treatments do much more to the maturing child than change his or her appearance. They tamper recklessly with complicated, incompletely understood neurobiological mechanisms crucial in human physical and personal maturation. And they betray a thoughtlessness about a critical and unique distinction in the psychosocial development of human beings.
Let us consider these two aspects—recklessness and thoughtlessness—with special emphasis on their implications for “informed consent.”

RECKLESSNESS: With these “affirmative treatments” of the gender dysphoric child, we encounter two well-known snares in experimental science—namely, the tendency to treat a very complex system as if it were simple, and an accompanying tendency to study only the results of immediate interest rather than all the effects that result. The narrow focus of experimentalists may lead them to overlook more wide-ranging effects of their actions or to ignore shortfalls that those actions evoke.

There is no more complex system in human development than the dynamic neuroendocrine process that leads ultimately to successful and full sexual (and general personal) maturity. Some aspects are understood. Other aspects remain complete mysteries. We need to emphasize several points regarding the scientific information about puberty and the implications tied to disrupting it. They are most relevant to this proposed treatment program, even if widely ignored.

First: Puberty begins between the ages of eight and 14 in girls and nine and 14 in boys. All attempts at blocking the course of puberty are being made in young people whose capacity for judgment and decision-making in any other significant realm of life is not considered adequate.

Second: Much information exists describing the interactions between the brain and body during puberty. There are the dynamic feedback loops involving controls within the hypothalamus of the brain that evoke and manage puberty. There is the pituitary gland, which sits right beneath the hypothalamus and is the conduit of its direction of puberty as the “master gland” controlling the hormonal activity of the bodily endocrine glands, particularly the testis or ovary. And there are the gonadal hormone messages (testosterone, estrogen, progesterone) derived from testis or ovary that evoke pubertal bodily changes. But the underlying mechanism that launches puberty and thus sets these sequences in action is completely unknown.

In fact, when the 125th-anniversary issue of *Science* magazine highlighted what it saw as the 125 most compelling puzzles in science, one of the puzzles was “what triggers puberty?” The protocol for blocking puberty employed in the “affirmative treatment” of transgender youth frustrates this mysterious and critical triggering mechanism, and its promoters have no clear idea about what that might mean to overall brain and psychological development.

What we do know is that the testosterone, estrogen, and progesterone released by the male testis or the female ovary have “organizational effects” on the brain as well as “stimulating effects.” Not only do these hormones evoke sex-appropriate arousal, but they are also critical to producing sex-appropriate brain structures that have crucial and measurable psychological functions in mental life. Altering the natural hormonal constitution in adolescence by providing hormonal synthetics opposite to one’s genetic constitution cannot fail to disrupt these “organizational” matters—again, with unknowable long-term effects.

The hypothalamus, which directs the neuroendocrine sequences of puberty, is itself embedded centrally and strategically within the “limbic system” of the brain, where it manages the endocrine and autonomic (visceral) states of the body and also contributes to shaping the emotional and motivational states of the mind. This is a most complex relationship. The limbic system is the brain network of interconnected nuclei and neural tracts (the amygdala, hippocampus, fornix, stria terminalis, and the like) that together shape and sustain the person’s “attitude” toward the outer world. The hypothalamus at its very center harbors the neural mechanisms that render the bodily endocrine and autonomic features apt for the feelings, moods, and dispositions that represent such “attitudes”—feelings of trust or fear, confidence or dread, composure or anxiety, pleasure or displeasure, fight or flight, and so on.

The hypothalamus also shares responsibility for the person’s perceptions of the environment that generate these feelings (and the motivations evoked) through its reciprocating neural interconnections with the nuclei of the limbic system and with the frontal neocortex.

Reflecting on these psycho-biological, indeed self-constituting, effects of the dynamic features of puberty, a court in the United Kingdom wrote in December 2020 that puberty blockers “prevent the child go-

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Providing hormonal synthetics opposite to one’s genetic constitution cannot fail to disrupt ‘organizational’ matters in the brain—again, with unknowable long-term effects.

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It appears that the majority of children complaining of distress with their natal sex do best if not treated: They outgrow their sense of being in the ‘wrong body.’

ing through puberty in the normal biological process; ...this means that the child is not undergoing the physical and consequential psychological changes which would contribute to the understanding of a person’s identity.” The court concluded that puberty-blocking “treatment goes to the heart of an individual’s identity, and is thus, quite possibly, unique as a medical treatment...The treatment involved is truly life-changing.”

This legal judgment picks up on the thoughtless side of these treatments—their senseless disregard for a critical and defining distinction in the psychosocial development of human beings.

In most of the animal kingdom, the successful passage of the individual through puberty essentially “completes” the developmental process. From that point on, the animal’s life tasks are survival and reproduction, rather than further individuation. By contrast, many of the most important aspects of human development occur after puberty. Although much is prepared during the long prepubescent phase, the moral, social, and intellectual capabilities of individual people—those features they need to govern and care for themselves—do not bloom until after it.

In other animals, all that they shall be is in place at puberty. For us, puberty amounts to the start of our becoming contributing members to our times. To block puberty and then artificially redirect its course is to tamper with a vital human developmental matter with no reason for confidence in what will emerge beyond a lifetime preoccupied with medico-surgical interventions to maintain the illusion that one’s sex has changed.

It was with this crucial feature of human beings in mind that the UK court ruled that no child is capable of consenting to these treatments. The court in Bell v. Tavistock noted “the immediate consequences of the treatment in physical and psychological terms,” “the unknown physical consequences of taking puberty blockers,” and the prospective loss of sexual function and fertility.

The court then wrote that a child under 16 could scarcely “understand and weigh up such information. Although a child may understand the concept of the loss of fertility for example, this is not the same as understanding how this will affect his or her adult life. A child’s attitude to having biological children and the understanding of what this really means, is likely to change between childhood and adulthood.” Indeed, “for many children,” it “will not be possible to conceptualize what not being able to give birth to children (or conceive children with their own sperm) would mean in adult life,” the court wrote. Children can neither understand nor evaluate the information that they receive precisely because they are not adults.

Not only is the capacity for informed consent limited in children, experience has provided a strong hint that puberty-blocking may also significantly impair the voluntariness with which these children consent to subsequent cross-sex hormonal regimens and even to later surgeries. Eighty-five to 90 percent of children with gender dysphoria abandon it if their puberty proceeds without interference. In contrast, fewer than 10 percent of children started on puberty blockers (with all the neuroendocrine effects we described above) come to reject these ideas or rebuff proposals to proceed with cross-sex hormones and surgery.

It thus appears that the majority of children complaining of distress with their natal sex do best if not treated: They outgrow their sense of being in the “wrong body” and come to live peacefully being the male or female they were found to be at birth. This point did not elude the UK court. Besides holding that children were incapable of consenting to this treatment, the court also wrote: “The evidence shows that the vast majority of children who take [puberty blockers] move on to take cross-sex hormones, that [these] are two stages of one clinical pathway and once on that pathway it is extremely rare for a child to get off it.”

Clinicians cannot identify children who complain of gender dysphoria but who will naturally outgrow it. The Endocrine Society’s guidelines, for example, state that current knowledge does not enable medical professionals to “predict the psychosexual outcome for any specific child.” This uncertainty is crucially important if, as experience suggests, puberty blockers operate on the patients so as to lock them into the later, even more radical, steps of cross-sex hormones and mutilating surgeries many of them may come to regret.

Finally, we believe that the basis for holding that no youth can responsibly consent to these treatments goes deeper still. It is not primarily that children lack the sophistication to understand the information that
‘Affirmative’ treatment of a child with gender dysphoria subverts the concept of informed consent by ignoring the momentous issue of just what’s been given up.

is offered to them, although they do. It is not principally that they lack the maturity to evaluate the costs and benefits implied by that information, although they do. It is not even mainly that they are drawn by their distress as if involuntarily into a closed loop of further (and still more) pharmaceutical dependence, although they are. It is rather that blocking pubescent development as the boy or girl one is, and then substituting for it a drug-induced simulacrum of the post-pubescent development of the boy or girl one imagines oneself to be, assumes more than anyone can about the outcome of these manipulations.

Actual and truly informed consent in these matters is impossible for anyone—for the child or for the most concerned and dutiful parent. How can anyone legitimately support this course of treatment when no one can know either what person would have emerged had it not been followed or what human costs were paid because it was? “Affirmative” treatment of a child with gender dysphoria subverts the concept of informed consent by ignoring the momentous issue of just what’s been given up. If nobody really knows what’s happening, how can one consent to it?

For all these reasons, we maintain that this program, dominant though it is in our elite cultural conversation, is going to collapse. The injuries being inflicted recklessly and thoughtlessly on children will surely upend it.

All the makings of a legal sea change are present here. To illustrate what we mean, picture a likely case of a 10-year-old girl today, somewhere in the United States, who is being put on puberty blockers by a “gender clinician” with the support of her mother or father. They listened to this girl—let’s call her Kelsey—argue against her sex. Later, at age 25, Kelsey—now known as Kevin—awakens realizing that she has a five o’clock shadow, that she is neither male nor female in sexual appearance, having undergone various mutilations to her body, and that she is infertile.

This now emotionally devastated young woman will ask her parents: “How did you let this happen to me?” And her parents will reply, “Well, the doctors said...” Then parents and Kelsey will visit the doctors and ask, “Why did you recommend this treatment?” The doctors will reply, “That’s standard treatment for the transgendered.” Kelsey will answer, “But I wasn’t transgendered, I was a confused child!” And the doctors will be forced to admit, “We can’t identify the children who will later show that the transgender diagnosis didn’t fit.”

One adult who had undergone “gender-transition” reported regrets such as Kelsey’s in the UK Tavistock case:

It is only until recently that I have started to think about having children and if that is ever a possibility, I have to live with the fact that I will not be able to breastfeed my children. I still do not believe that I have fully processed the surgical procedure that I had to remove my breasts and how major it really was. I made a brash decision as a teenager, (as a lot of teenagers do) trying to find confidence and happiness, except now the rest of my life will be negatively affected. I cannot reverse any of the physical, mental or legal changes that I went through. Transition was a very temporary, superficial fix for a very complex identity issue.

With the appearance in the United States of even one well-publicized case such as Kelsey’s, with its obvious potential for a major lawsuit, the transgender misadventure will come to a close. A public outcry will start, insurance companies will cease malpractice support as lawsuits emerge, and reputations of doctors and health systems will sink.

The damage to the victims will nonetheless be irreparable and (as Abigail Shrier’s 2020 book on this subject has it) irreversible.* Their sense of betrayal will be matched by the shame of everyone capable of feeling it.

For all these reasons, we join with the people of Arkansas and say, “Leave the kids alone.” Let their brains and bodies develop unimpeded, and let them grow into the adults they would naturally be. Then, after they have acquired some understanding of what is involved and some readiness to accept the consequences of their decisions, let them choose for themselves what they want from their lives and their given sexual natures.

* Irreversible Damage: Teenage Girls and the Transgender Craze (Regnery Publishing).
Will Parents Become Activists?

A new movement might be aborning

By Christine Rosen

THERE ARE currently about 63 million people in the United States who have children under the age of 18. They form a cohort larger than any religious or ethnic group. Why, then, is there no “parents movement” akin to the ones dedicated to women’s rights, LGBTQ rights, and racial equality? Why has there never been such a movement?

To answer these questions, we need to consider changes in the American social fabric. Several generations ago, most Americans became parents—and all domestic politics were centered to some extent on their needs. Today, a growing number of people don’t have children and don’t share the specific interests of parents. They make different demands of social institutions. The U.S. Census Bureau noted the trend in 2017: “The share of adults living without children has climbed 19 points since 1867 to 71.3 percent.” While many of those people have adult children and grandchildren, their direct concern with family issues wanes with age. More important was the finding of the Institute for Family Studies in 2020: “Childlessness is currently rising rapidly among younger women, and has begun to rise among women in their late thirties, too.” Popular culture has reinforced the trend: An entire genre of nonfiction books with titles such as *Childfree and Loving It!* and *Childfree by Choice* extols the virtues of the “childfree lifestyle.”

This development has implications for policy-making and for the forms that our institutions and civic spaces take. Policymakers, particularly on the left, are increasingly eager to distribute taxpayer money to the childless. President Biden’s American Rescue Plan recently tripled the Earned Income Tax Credit for childless Americans, for example. That marks a dramatic departure from the purpose of the EITC; its original aim was to help low-income parents stay out of poverty while maintaining employment.

Writing in the *Atlantic* in 2019, Derek Thompson noted the impact that the disappearance of parents had on how cities function. He described watching a young mother navigate an East Village walk-up with young children and a stroller as akin to observing the

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torment of Sisyphus: “It looked like hell—or, as I once suggested to a roommate, a carefully staged public-service announcement against family formation.”

That announcement has been heard: In cities across the country, the fastest-growing group is college-educated people without children, and housing prices and resources increasingly reflect their lifestyle needs, not those of families. “Families with children older than 6 are in outright decline in these places,” Thompson noted. “As the sociologists Richard Lloyd and Terry Nichols Clark put it, [cities] are ‘entertainment machines’ for the young, rich, and mostly childless.”

At the same time, people and institutions whose mission is supposedly to serve as help-mets in the rearing of America’s children have morphed into powerful special-interest groups of their own. Those umbrella organizations are not aligned with the needs of parents but are dedicated instead to the narrow interests of their members. Despite the sentimental lip service paid to the selflessness and nobility of educators, the disastrous pandemic-related school closures driven by union demands revealed a staggering divergence between the needs of families and the wants and desires of the education establishment.

Similarly, state and local governments, particularly in more densely populated areas, now place parents far down the priority list of their constituents—after unionized workers, developers, and businesses that cater to the wealthy and child-free.

These changes suggest that parents qua parents now have a common interest that needs defending and advocating in the public sphere. The pandemic and the recent spikes in crime and civil disorder have pushed these needs to the forefront of American life. What recourse do parents have when politics actively interferes with their ability to raise their children? Is it possible that we have reached a cultural and political moment when their concerns (and justifiable anger) might lead them to organize themselves and become an effective and sustained activist force capable of swaying elections?

The first signs of a true “parents movement” began to reveal themselves during the pandemic, with school closures in particular.

The first signs of a true ‘parents movement’ began to reveal themselves during the pandemic, with school closures in particular.

Democratic elected officials had kept public schools closed.

Much of the energy for these fights came from self-described liberal and progressive parents—because it was in their Democratic, union-dominated states that schoolchildren were most likely to languish in virtual learning. Parents organized and put pressure on the public-school district in largely progressive Maplewood, New Jersey, to reopen classrooms, for example. Eventually parents in Maplewood and nearby Montclair sued the school district in federal court to force reopening (the pressure of a pending lawsuit encouraged

In late July 2021, private-school parents in California scored a large victory in the liberal Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals after suing the state because it had forced private schools to close. “California’s forced closure of their private schools implicates a right that has long been considered fundamental under the applicable caselaw—the right of parents to control their children’s education and to choose their children’s educational forum,” Judge Daniel Collins ruled. As disturbing evidence has poured in about just how far behind many students have fallen after a year of virtual learning, while the number of pediatric deaths from COVID-19 remained extremely low, it’s clear the parents who urged reopening were right all along.

This recent parent activism has also provided new energy to existing campaigns for school choice and charter schools, as well as to homeschooling. The U.S. Census Bureau reported in March 2021 that the number of homeschooling households had reached 11 percent in September 2020, more than double what it had been just six months earlier. The National Black Home Educators, an organization that has represented black homeschooling families for more than 20 years, saw its membership increase from 5,000 to 35,000 during the pandemic.

It was not merely school closures that prompted localized parent revolts and new experiments in learning. Inconsistent and often unscientific protocols put in place by elected officials—outdoor mask mandates for the very young and the closure of playgrounds in cities such as New York—were a visible sign of the
heavy hand of the state actively working to prevent children from going about their daily lives. And a harsh reminder that parents could do little about it.

At the same time, the latest and most aggressive iteration of identity politics in education began to affect K–12 schools nationwide: critical race theory (CRT). While its ideological advocates argued that their efforts to rewrite school curricula are merely meant to encourage “equity,” “diversity,” and racial reckoning, many parents on the ground have not been persuaded—including parents who had eagerly voted for Joe Biden.

Elina Kaplan, a Biden voter (and immigrant from the Soviet Union) is “alarmed over her state’s new model ethnic studies curriculum, which cites critical race theory as a ‘key theoretical framework and pedagogy;’” according to Politico. No mere keyboard warrior, Kaplan became an activist: She “launched an email list, set up meetings with state legislators and recruited people to meet with their school boards to discuss ethnic studies.”

She is not alone. Among “Democrat-leaning or politically moderate suburbanites interviewed by Politico in six states, all but one of which were won by Biden,” parents are “up in arms over their school systems’ new equity initiatives, which they argue are costly and divisive, encouraging students to group themselves by race and take pro-activist stances.” Politico canvassed voters in places such as the Northern Virginia suburbs, Westchester County, New York, and Maricopa County, Arizona—hardly Republican strongholds. What they found (and polls by Public Opinion Strategies have confirmed) should worry Democrats: “48 percent of independent voters and 59 percent of public-school parents overall in Loudoun and neighboring Fairfax County viewed critical race theory negatively, while 31 percent and 39 percent of each group had positive views.”

Similar outrage erupted in Biden-friendly Palm Beach County when a Democrat-dominated school board vowed in a statement to eliminate “white advantage.” Parents protested, prompting internecine warfare. As Politico: reported, “In May, the majority of Democrats on the school board sided with the protest-
elected leaders were about this challenge. As school closures dragged on, parent concerns over the lack of child care and their struggle to keep their children on track educationally were frequently mocked by some of the most powerful politicians and activists in the land.

The mockery was ironic, given that many of those same leaders are not themselves parents. American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten, who successfully lobbied officials in the Biden administration to keep unnecessary restrictions in place in schools that forced many to remain closed this spring, is childless. This does not stop her from frequently using children as political weapons in her efforts to increase the power of the teachers’ unions.

So, too, Vice President Kamala Harris. For the first time in the modern era, we have someone very close to the presidency who has never raised children. Harris married Doug Emhoff in 2014; he has two children from his previous marriage who were in high school when he and Harris wed. She appears well aware of the problematic optics of being a childless politician: When she launched her bid for president in Oakland, California, in 2019, she toted her two-year-old niece around the stage and has since given many interviews in which she notes that her stepchildren refer to her as “Momala.”

None of that would be relevant if Harris hadn’t also mocked the work that parents actually do. During an event in Pennsylvania in September 2020, Harris started cackling like she’d just told the world’s funniest joke when she mentioned that parents want their children back in school. At another appearance in Connecticut, she laughed loudly while saying, “More people are seeing that, yeah, affordable child care is a big deal. More parents are seeing the value of educators when they had to bring their kids and say we’re not paying them nearly enough.” These astonishing remarks were taken, and taken correctly, as a slap in the face of millions of parents who were struggling to work and take care of their children during mandatory lockdowns.

HOW FEASIBLE is it that parents might manage to sustain a political class consciousness among themselves, a sense of common purpose powerful enough to achieve broader political objectives while avoiding partisan bickering?

There are formidable challenges, including the aforementioned demographic trends. As the Wall Street Journal recently reported “This year, the U.S. will record at least 300,00 fewer births because the uncertain economy and the pandemic dissuaded women from having babies… Provisional government data already show births in the first three months of 2021 declined compared with 2020.” These demographic shifts, if they continue, could foster a culture that creates and maintains fewer institutions that cater to the needs of parents, which itself encourages young people to see parenthood as something more challenging—and perhaps not worth doing at all.

It’s also the case that parents, particularly working parents, are among the most time-crunched citizens, putting them at a disadvantage in pursuing activism compared with the full-time political players and powerful and well-funded public-sector unions they often find themselves challenging.

There is also the risk that parent activism will devolve into standard special-interest-group politicking. In the past, campaigns spearheaded by parents as parents tended to do just that. Twentieth-century organizations such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving, or Tipper Gore’s Parents Music Resource Center, as well as more recent gun-control groups such as Everytown for Gun Safety, focus on single issues.

Some of the newest parent activist groups that have organized quickly and effectively resemble such groups: Fight For Schools, originally organized by parents in Loudon County, Virginia, focuses largely on school closures and critical race theory debates. The group thus far has been effective. Thanks to its efforts, six Loudoun County school-board officials currently face a recall over the board’s handling of school closures and CRT initiatives.

Parents often divide along race and class lines with regard to certain issues. Efforts to eliminate meritocratic measurements of excellence at competitive schools have caused such divisions. Even those who have joined forces to save meritocracy in K–12 schools might find that enthusiasm fading once their children are competing against one another for spaces in elite colleges.

And yet, localized parent awakenings, if they can be sustained, could sway future elections. Politically
with children must advocate on behalf of their children's interests is relatively small.

And yet, while children eventually outgrow the authority of their parents, do parents ever outgrow the sense of authority they believe they deserve to exercise in political debate? Activists and politicians often like to say that they speak not as partisans but “as a mother” or “as a father.” Their efforts might ultimately be cynical, but their appeal to authority is one all parents make at some point in their child-rearing journey.

The sociologist Robert Nisbet once observed that even in a highly individualistic society such as ours, the family unit is one of the most crucial building blocks; parents therefore have a duty to ensure that the state (or the culture, or other outside forces) doesn't actively prevent them from doing what is best for their families. Parents can do this because they have inherent authority in their role as parents (as compared with the power that the state often exercises over its citizens).

“Authority, unlike power, is not rooted in force alone, whether latent or actual,” Nisbet wrote in The Twilight of Authority. “It is built into the very fabric of human association. Civil society is a tissue of authorities. Authority has no reality save in the memberships and allegiances of the members of an organization,” among which he listed the family first. “The authority of the family follows from its indispensable function.... When the function has become displaced or weakened, when allegiances have been transferred to other entities, there can be no other consequence but a decline of authority.”

Perhaps it is time for parents to claw back some of the allegiances they have often unwittingly transferred to teachers’ unions, the state, and an expert class that has too often claimed to speak for families while failing to consider their needs.

Ceding that authority is why parents found themselves powerless when teachers’ unions successfully pressured elected officials (and the CDC) to shut schools; when school boards unilaterally changed the curriculum to promote questionable ideological claims about race; and when Defund the Police activists put abstract notions of justice ahead of everyday public safety in neighborhoods across the country.

This is the distinction that is being fought over in many of these current debates, and one that newly galvanized parents, if they are determined enough, could translate into a genuine and nonpartisan political movement.

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* Parents as a political class also face significant internal partisan divisions. Consider the recent trend of parents drafting children into their own political activism—the moms and dads who dress their toddlers in Che T-shirts and read them A Is for Activist for their bedtime story. Most of them are happy to use their kids as accessories to their own (usually liberal) activism. In its extreme form, politically activist parents can do real harm to their children. The novelist and activist Alice Walker’s daughter Rebecca once told the Guardian, “My parents were so deeply involved in the civil-rights movement that a lot of my needs as a young person were not fully seen and addressed, or considered as important as the movement....It felt very lonely and vulnerable.” There are enough scared children of 20th-century activists that writer John Blake published an entire book about them, The Children of the Movement.

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Children’s needs should be determined by their parents. Not by the suburban school boards who couldn’t manage to get children back in classrooms.

Will Parents Become Activists? : September 2021
In the risky-generalization department, Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote: “If we stop caring for animals, we will stop caring for people.” Whatever the truth quotient here, many people do indeed care for their animals passionately and often at great expense. While on a book-promotion tour in California, I was driven by a woman who told me that she had just spent $6,000 for chemotherapy for her 12-year-old wire-hair terrier. Years ago, it was a sign of perfect looniness when an elderly spinster left her (sometimes sizable) estate to her beloved cat. Today, this seems a touch more sensible than leaving money to one’s university or college.

To offer a risky generalization of my own: One of the major differences between people who have pets—and perhaps among humankind in general—is that between those who favor dogs and those who favor cats. Many, myself among them, like both, but never equally. Those who favor dogs are surely in the majority. Dog owners expect, and generally receive, pleasing affection from them. Unalterable devotion is the last thing one is likely to receive from a cat. Affection one might receive, but entirely on the cat’s terms, which is to say when it is in a mood to dispense it. Cats are independent in a way no domesticated dog is likely to be. Unless they are sure of a reward, they tend not to come when called, and are intractable generally. Cats do not travel in packs and as often as not eschew the company of other cats, whom they often fear will horn in on their territory. Cats, in short, are for the most part in business for themselves.

Worshiped in ancient Egypt as the animal of the gods, if not gods themselves, cats throughout history have also been despised, loathed, thought evil incarnate, tortured. The cause of cats is not helped by the fact that something on the order of 10 percent of the population is said to be allergic to them. No word exists to describe those who fear and sometimes hate.

Most people prefer to adopt kittens, but when I first saw her, I found Dolly’s rich coat and intelligent face irresistible and, on a subsequent visit, so did my wife.

dogs, while “ailurophobe” describes the more common phenomenon of someone with a strong antipathy to cats. “Ailurophobia,” writes Carl Van Vechten in A Tiger in the House, perhaps the best book ever written about cats, “is a stronger feeling than hate; it is a most abject kind of fear.” Van Vechten goes on to describe the extreme reactions of ailurophobes, from nervous worry to violent terror to actual convulsions at the mere sight of a cat. Only snakes and rats are hated more than cats.

History’s most famous ailurophobe was probably Napoleon. The 16th-century French poet Pierre de Ronsard expressed his hatred of cats in the following quatrain:

There is no man now living anywhere
Who hates cats with a deeper hate than I;
I hate their eyes, their heads, the way they stare,
And when I see one come, I turn and fly.

And yet, for the past two decades, I have lived with a cat. With three different cats, to be precise; two calicos, one tabby, all females. I prefer female to male cats; feline, after all, suggests femininity. The tabby, Isabelle by name, had to be put down, her body riddled with cancer at age 13. The first of the two calicos, Hermione, I found one morning dead at the age of five under a chair in our living room, presumably from an aneurysm. The third, Dolly, we adopted five years ago from the Evanston Animal Shelter when she was seven. No two cats are quite alike, and that has certainly been true of the cats rooming chez Epstein. Isabelle tended to be elegantly passive and accommodating, allowing strangers and children to pet her. Hermione was rambunctious, awakening my wife at 6:30 a.m. for her own breakfast, going bonkers when a can of tuna was opened, forever attempting to escape into our outer hallway. Dolly has been impressively patient and charmingly content. Her manner and the pleasure she brings I should like briefly to describe.

Most people prefer to adopt kittens, but when I first saw her, I found Dolly’s rich coat and intelligent face irresistible and, on a subsequent visit, so did my wife. She is brilliantly tricolored—black, white, marmalade orange, all prettily melding into one another—with a small head and pleasingly plump body. I frequently describe her as one of those fat cats from City Hall. Little is known of her previous history. She was apparently left in a cat carrying case one evening on the steps of the Evanston Animal Shelter. Perhaps her owner had died, or moved, or married an ailurophobe. A college student who was a volunteer at the shelter and who took Dolly home for a brief period left only the information that she, Dolly, liked to be brushed. Adoption, of animals as of humans, is always a crapshoot, but in Dolly, a cat perfectly mated to us, the roll came up a solid seven.

When I brought Dolly home to our apartment, I showed her the placement of her litter box in our main bathroom, and no further tour was required. On her own she discovered the three bowls—one for water, another for dry food, a third for a small daily portion of moist food, collectively known as the buffet—that lie on the kitchen floor to the left of the refrigerator. She took over her predecessor Hermione’s bed. She cased the joint, soon picked out a few favorite spots, and has ever since walked about it as if she held the mortgage.

Dolores was her name when we brought her home. Dolores, however, sounded too dolorous, and my wife quickly changed her name to Dolly. This allowed me to master and not infrequently sing to her the Jerry Herman lyric of “Hello, Dolly”: “So nice to have you back where you belong.” The naming of cats is a serious business. My own belief is that cats are too dignified for overly affectionate names. Hippolyte Taine kept three cats, named Puss, Ebène, and Mitonne. None, in my view, is sufficiently stately. I know a young man who acquired a sphynx, or hairless cat, and named him, cruelly, Chemo. I like an earnest, adult name for a cat: Linda or Clara, say, or Ralph or Sidney. T.S. Eliot, in “The Naming of Cats,” puts this serious matter in comic terms:

The Naming of Cats is a difficult matter,
It isn’t just one of your holiday games;
You may think at first I’m as mad as a hatter
When I tell you, a cat must have THREE
DIFFERENT NAMES.
First of all, there’s the name that the family
use daily,
Such as Peter, Augustus, Alonzo, or James,
Such as Victor or Jonathan, George or Bill Bailey—
All of them sensible everyday names.
There are fancier names if you think they sound sweeter,
Although possessed of a full set of claws, Dolly has caused no damage of any kind, not the least scratch on any of our furniture. Through the day she gives off an aura of calm.

Some for the gentlemen, some for the dames:
Such as Plato, Admetus, Electra, Demeter—
But all of them sensible everyday names.
But I tell you, a cat needs a name that’s particular,
A name that’s peculiar, and more dignified,
Else how can he keep up his tail perpendicular,
Or spread out his whiskers, or cherish his pride?

Dolly is one cat that curiosity will never kill.
Friends or strangers come into our apartment, and she does not stir to greet them. She has never shown the least interest in life in our outer hallway. She spends a fair amount of time atop the back of the couch, which we have come to call the mezzanine, in the room where we keep our television set, viewing the street six stories below or napping off when the mood strikes her, which it frequently does. She is alarmed only by the noise of vacuum cleaners or thunderstorms, both of which drive her into one of our closets or under our bed until the havoc caused by either passes. While she can flick a paw or turn over her body quickly, I have never seen Dolly run; a brisk waddle is the best she does. Although possessed of a full set of claws, in the five years she has lived with us, she has caused no damage of any kind, not the least scratch on any of our furniture, not a single tchotchke knocked over or chipped. Through the day she gives off an aura of calm, serenity even.

Soon after I arise and head toward the kitchen to prepare my tea and toast, Dolly puts in her first appearance. I fill the dishes of her buffet. She nibbles a bit of this, a touch of that, and follows me to the chair in my living room where I do an hour or so of morning reading. She appears at my feet, asking with her eyes to be picked up and set upon my lap, which I am more than pleased to do. There she sits, gazing outward at the street, purring gently as I stroke her back and administer further strokes under her chin, which she seems especially to like.

With Dolly on my lap in the early morning, my head clears and random thoughts begin to flow. Among them thoughts about her life, her happiness being alone with two older human beings, desires she might have or once have had that cannot any longer be satisfied. After 20 minutes or so, she departs my lap and waits upon a nearby rug for me to brush her. She will sometimes wait as long as 45 minutes for a five-minute brushing. Whence did this patience derive? I suspect from her months in a small cage at the Evanston Animal Shelter. After the grooming, we proceed into the kitchen, where she gets her morning reward of six chicken-flavored Greenie treats.

Much of the day Dolly sleeps. Does she dream? And if she does, of what do these dreams consist? A freer life? Memory of kittens to which years before she may have given birth? At dinner she now sits on my lap, which makes eating a touch awkward, but I find the honor of her wanting to be there worth the awkwardness. In the evening she lies between my wife and me on the couch where we sit to watch television. Here she tends to nuzzle up to my wife. (Sisterhood, after all, is powerful.) Something immensely calming there is about having her there with us as the television set blares away at English detective stories or Chicago Cubs or White Sox games. Her day ends with six more Greenie treats. On winter nights she sometimes sleeps at the end of our bed. Otherwise she sleeps in her own bed or on a wing chair facing a bank of windows.

Why does having Dolly with us give such pleasure? In Feline Philosophy: Cats and the Meaning of Life, John Gray, a retired professor of European thought at the London School of Economics, helps answer the question. Toward the close of his brief and well-written book, he writes that “while cats have nothing to learn from us, we can learn from them how to lighten the load that comes with being human.” Cats are Gray’s ostensible subject, but his true subject is human nature: “If cats could look back on their lives, might they wish that they had never lived? It is hard to think so. Not making stories of their lives, they cannot think of them as tragic or wish they had never been born. They accept life as a gift,” he writes, with the implication that human beings do not.

Throughout his pages, Gray distinguishes the differences, social and philosophical, between cats and humans. Cats do not form social groups, or recognize leaders, including human leaders. Nor do they know jealousy or boredom. They show few signs of sharing the feelings of others. Altruism, a word coined by Auguste Comte in the 19th century, is unknown to cats, which means neither are those programs for the im-
Could my regard, bordering on reverence, for Dolly have anything to do with my being a writer? Writers have claimed not merely affection for but affinity with cats.

As psychoanalysis was said by Karl Kraus to be the disease of which it purports to be the cure, for Gray, “philosophy is a symptom of the disorder it pretends to remedy.” Human beings have philosophy; cats have the simple enjoyment of everyday life.

Could my regard, bordering on reverence, for Dolly have anything to do with my being a writer? Writers have claimed not merely affection for but affinity with cats. They have been an almost standard subject for poets to write about; cats appear, for example, in many of Baudelaire’s poems. “As an inspiration to the author I do not think the cat can be over-estimated,” Carl Van Vechten writes. “He suggests so much grace, power, beauty, motion, mysticism.” The cat, he adds, may even serve as a model for the critic: “The sharp but concealed claws, the contracting pupil of the eye, which allows only the necessary amount of light to enter, independence, should be the best of models for any critic.”

Over the years, French writers have shown a particular partiality to cats, many of them—Chateaubriand, Colette, Pierre Loti—adding substantially to the felinature, or literature about cats. Among the English, a famously dog-loving nation, Jeremy Bentham and Samuel Butler, neither of whom were high on human beings, turn out to have been ailurophiles. American cat-loving literati have included Edgar Allen Poe, Mark Twain, Henry James, Sarah Orne Jewett, and the essayist Agnes Repplier.

As I come to the end of this essay, Dolly, having been brushed and treated, is currently asleep on the mezzanine. She will leave a time or two before the morning is out for a trip to the buffet for a nibble and a sip of water, after which she often cleans herself. She is likely to put in an appearance while we are lunching at our kitchen counter. The most unobtrusive of creatures, she requires little attention, asks nothing of us. She makes no noise, apart from the pleasing tap-tap of her clawed paws against our wooden floors on her way to her litter box. Later she will join us to watch the evening news. What the stock market has done, how great the rising murder toll in Chicago, the latest scur- rilous lies of politicians, the unending anger of victim groups, about all this Dolly couldn’t care less, while we human beings care a great deal, though we can do little or nothing about any of it. Makes one wonder whether she, Dolly, a mere creature, and not we, despite calling ourselves homo sapiens, hasn’t got it right.
Charles Murray, Wrong and Right
A contrarian continues his work
By Wilfred C. Reilly

CHARLES MURRAY is likely wrong about the causes and extent of the phenomena he documents, but he is correct about their implications. In his newest book, Facing Reality, Murray argues that racial differences in traits such as “cognitive ability” and crime rate explain many outcomes that today are universally attributed to “systemic racism.” Much of the data Murray assembles to support his point can, at the very least, be challenged. His estimate of the black crime rate is four times the accepted U.S. rate, for example. At a deeper level, the genetic explanation he may well see as ultimately causal for the statistics he discusses (Murray co-wrote The Bell Curve two decades ago) is challenged by much of his own data: Murray’s figures indicate that the overall black IQ rate has risen from 84–85 to 91 in the very recent past, which suggests mutability. However, the basic validity of the point that having a low SAT score or a felony record influences life outcomes more than vague modern racism cannot be denied by honest debaters.

Murray’s core point is very simple, and I have made it myself in my own book Taboo. In upper-middle-class discourse in the U.S., it has been commonplace for a decade or more to attribute all racial group gaps in performance—the average black household makes about $44,000 per year, versus $66,000 for whites—to subtle forms of racism such as those invoked by the widely lauded Ibram X. Kendi. However, at some level, we all know this is not true. Seventy percent or more of the world-famous centimillionaires in the NBA are black, and this is probably not due to widespread American bias against white star jocks. As

Wilfred C. Reilly, a political science professor at Kentucky State University, is the author of Taboo: 10 Facts You Can’t Talk About.
Thomas Sowell, June O’Neill, and others have pointed out, traits such as median age, region of residence, and aptitude-test scores vary widely among groups, and these characteristics almost totally predict dependent variables like income.

Murray’s book makes an intentionally provocative version of this point, focused on the independent variables of tested IQ and crime rate. Murray contends early on (using NAEP-norming, if you’re a curious wonk) that the current average IQ in the U.S. is 91 for blacks (whom he calls “Africans”), 94 for Latinos, 103 for whites (“Europeans”), and 108 for Asians. A bit further on, he accurately notes that “African” rates of violent crime are far higher than white ones at least in a selected group of cities: 11.6 to 1 in New York City, 14.5 to 1 in Chicago, 19.9 to 1 in Washington, D.C., and so forth. He argues, again correctly, that data such as these obviously affect many other metrics of performance. Employers seeking a potential young executive with a college degree and an IQ in the 135+ range will be looking within a current pool that contains “only about 2,800 Africans and 9,500 Latins compared to 50,700 Asians and 160,100 Europeans.”

Much of this is true. However, Murray’s broader point is, again at the very least, to be taken only with multiple major caveats. There are issues with some of his numbers. For example, Murray's estimate of the ratio (on page 51) between the black and white violent-crime rates seems to be about 10:1. He arrives at this frightening figure by analyzing the crime data from 13 specific large cities that report the race of offenders in criminal cases, ranging from Urbana, Illinois, and Charleston, South Carolina, to New York, and breaking down the race of all persons arrested for serious violent offenses in those locales.

This is a technique I have almost never seen used in a published criminal-justice or political-science paper, and there are reasons for this. The current composition of most large American cities, following ethnic white flight in the 1970s, includes a black and Hispanic population poorer than the national average alongside a “yuppie” white population far wealthier than the national average. Washington and Baltimore may well be the ultimate examples of this trend, and it would likely shock few residents of the capital city to learn that desperately poor black residents have almost 20 times the (blue-collar!) crime rate of Caucasian senators and the interns staffing their offices. “Now do the rest of the country,” a cynic might say.

When scholars do so, we obtain results dramatically different from Murray’s. It is worth noting here that the federal government compiles a well-respected estimate of the actual national crime rate literally every year, via the BJS-NCVS methodology of anonymously surveying hundreds of thousands of Americans about their experiences with crime. In the most recent year when data were gathered for all major U.S. racial groups, including outreach to respondents in poor and high-crime white areas, the actual ratio of the black crime rate to the white crime rate was 2.4:1. And that was before any adjustments for age or social class. That’s nothing to brag about, to be sure, and “we” need to work on it, but it ain’t ten-to-one. Given the existence of this well-known and annually discussed figure, one has to wonder why Murray didn't simply use it to illustrate his point, adding methodological critiques whenever he deemed them appropriate.

Similarly, Murray’s estimate of the white American IQ at 103—and thus still 10 points higher than the black IQ—necessitates the exclusion of all Caucasian Hispanics, Arabs, and so on from the “white” category and redefining the remaining whites as “Europeans.” In so doing, he reduces the estimate of the current percentage of white people in America from around 74 percent to just 60 percent. I do not know how common the first emendation is in the field of psychometrics and similar disciplines, but I will note that most estimates of the current or recent-past white IQ place it at 100. If we assume that estimate is correct, then the current black–white gap in tested IQ would be, at most, 9 to 10 points.

THAT LAST POINT illustrates a deeper issue with several of Murray’s arguments, and with the “hereditarian” position in general. While genetic hereditarianism is not the focus of Facing Reality, Murray was one of the two authors of The Bell Curve, and an advocate of the idea that genes are at least potentially the determinant of most group IQ and performance gaps. However, a purely empirical look at the data compiled for Facing Reality illustrates several major problems with that.

For example, a black IQ of 91 is still a bit below the
American white IQ, but is also 6 to 7 points higher than the black IQ Murray himself cited in *The Bell Curve* back in the early 1990s—and up to 14 points higher than the black IQ he and most other social scientists recognize as having existed in 1960. There is no genetic mechanism that can explain a single racial or ethnic group gaining roughly 15 IQ points in fewer than 60 years.

However, there is a nongenetic mechanism by which it could have occurred. Again, quantitative social scientists have empirically demonstrated that cultural variables such as study culture, family structure and stability, and even diet are highly predictive of the performance of different groups. From this perspective, it is not particularly surprising that black Americans posted gains in IQ after being freed from the shackles of segregation, and after integrating mainstream public schools and dramatically increasing our mean personal income. Similar transitions have been quite common historically. Thomas Sowell notes in his magisterial *Race and Culture* that the IQ of Poles/Polish Jews in the U.S. rose from 91 to 109 during a handful of decades in the mid-20th century.

Indeed, if I may speculate, culture and training also probably explain why the black IQ today remains as low as it does. An out-of-wedlock birth rate of 72 percent in the community and the teaching of woke gibberish in most urban public schools cannot have helped. Certainly, there is little doubt that black children in quality lottery charter schools—such as Success Academy, where the latest senior class sports an average SAT of 1268—would test at or above the national median score on the IQ boards.

Cultural explanations also suffice when it comes to one of the more troubling issues raised by Murray’s book: Why do U.S. Hispanics score almost identically to U.S. blacks on IQ tests, despite the fact that something like two-thirds of Hispanics are largely or entirely Caucasian (as Murray himself openly states on page 12)? We do not need to resort to unquestionably racist canards (not that Murray himself does so) about some potential element of mixed heritage or “Aztec blood” to explain these facts: Hispanics are a younger and more working-class population than whites or blacks, with a lower level of first-language fluency in English. It may well be that academic paradigms such as IQ hereditarianism and critical race theory often have less explanatory value in the real world than commonsense statements like: “You will do well on an exam if you study hard for it, and speak the language it is written in.”

**Commentary**

Whether or not all of his measures of the gaps he discusses are precisely correct—or indeed whether these gaps are due to racism, genes, or my preferred variables—Murray’s central point in *Facing Reality* is true: Major group differences around factors such as crime rate will affect the success and sometimes treatment of different groups. This is an empirical and mathematical point, totally distinct from ethical conversations about whether it “should” be the case. And Murray makes it well, especially when discussing the effect of crime on policing and business location, and the effect of test-scoring averages on minority hiring and representation.

The point about policing is especially relevant. The core argument of the Black Lives Matter movement is that there is a quiet police genocide taking place against black Americans, and the evidence provided for this is that the number of black individuals shot by police is 200–300 percent greater than our representation in the population overall. The elephant in the room here is that the black crime rate might simply be 200–300 percent of the white crime rate.

While I do not consider all of his selected cities to be representative, Murray points out that we see black-to-white violent crime ratios of 5.5:1 and 4:1 in such places as Tucson, Arizona, and Fayetteville, North Carolina. Everyday disparities of this kind obviously affect where police officers are stationed. All of those armed cops aren’t driving around in the ‘hood just to anger BLM.

Perhaps more important, consistent violent crime obviously affects where businesses choose to locate. It is more than a bit ironic to see complaints about inner-city areas being “food deserts” following almost immediately on the heels of the torchings of successful businesses such as Baltimore’s CVS or the heavily black and Asian Lake Street business district in Minneapolis. Few businesspeople, regardless of the color of their skin, are likely to open up their lovely little store in an area where mobs will probably burn it down.

More subtly but just as obviously, factors such as test scoring and educational accomplishment directly predict which jobs individuals are qualified to
do and choose to do. Group differences in tested IQ correlate with score differences on the SAT and GRE, both of which are essentially intelligence tests. In 2017, the mean-average SAT scores in the U.S. were a bit under 950 for blacks, roughly 970 for Hispanics, 1,118 for whites, and 1,181 for Asian Americans. As a result, there are simply fewer black and Hispanic folks in the graduate-school pipeline.

In one representative recent year, no black citizens obtained the highest degree in a range of fields—including wildlife biology, geophysics (and seismology), paleontology, astronomy, nuclear physics, European history, and classics. It is tempting for well-intentioned people on the political left and center, who notice facts such as this, to assume racism or at least to mutter sympathetic nothings about “the lack of a pipeline into ichthyology.” But reality can often be much simpler than the politicized modern explanations we enjoy today. How many brothers have both the requisite grades and scores and any desire to study fish as a lifelong career?

By asking such questions, does Murray make us “face reality”? Well, that depends what you mean. The “culturalist/hereditarian/CRT debate” is one of the most famous in social science, and it remains a debate because no one has yet won it. Murray does not win it here, and I doubt that some of his specific statistics—such as the crime-rate data—will ever become the accepted gold standard. However, Facing Reality does provide a powerful overview of one perspective that those who allege sweeping forms of systemic or institutional racism find it all to convenient to ignore—or cancel without due consideration. I would recommend reading the book, and the responses and alternatives to it.

The ‘culturalist/hereditarian/CRT debate’ remains a debate because no one has yet won it. Charles Murray does not win it in Facing Reality.
Is Henry V a Hero or a Villain? The Answer Is Yes

The glorious complexities of Shakespeare’s great history play

By Anthony Contrada

Henry V, William Shakespeare’s enduringly popular history play, is a study of England’s campaign of 1415 to (re)take France. In popular culture and film, Henry V is most often portrayed as a patriotic affair, a Shakespearean precursor to today’s underdog sports films, with the climactic pre-battle “band of brothers” speech in the place of a coach’s pre-game pep talk. But those portrayals—most famously Laurence Olivier’s Oscar-winning 1944 film, which was explicitly designed to bolster British spirits during World War II—do not take proper account of Shakespeare’s Olympian perspective. Shakespeare views the nationalism espoused by his title character at a great remove, and what his play says about leadership and the moral, legal, and political challenges inherent in any military action remains startlingly fresh and complex. To wit:

Scholars have long debated whether the United States’ presidency’s inherent executive power includes the residuum of “sovereign authority” once held by British

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Commentary
Audiences have had to grapple with the question of whether Shakespeare’s soldier-statesman is essentially a moral actor, a cynical political operator, or both at once.

monarchs or whether the Constitution limits the executive branch to its relatively scant enumerated powers. Whether or not English royal authority is truly a legal or historical source of the U.S. president’s executive authority, in practice, foreign affairs and warfare have proven to be spheres of action in which a president can most “be like a king.” The key issue Shakespeare addresses in Henry V is what truly motivates the “king.” Therefore, while Henry V deals with a late-medieval monarch’s military campaign, its most disturbing aspects remain uncomfortably relevant.

Since its debut, readers and audiences have had to grapple with the question of whether Shakespeare’s soldier-statesman Henry V is essentially a moral actor, a cynical political operator, or both at once. We see Henry’s approach on display as he justifies his decision to invade France, makes operational decisions during the campaign itself, publicly dispenses justice, and engages in moral bargaining with himself and others. Henry shows that he understands his ultimate political and military success may depend as much on maintaining a narrative about the moral necessity of his war against France and his image as a pious Christian king as it does on battlefield success or terrifying his French foes.

It is notable that the play’s opening scene immediately casts doubt on the legitimacy of Henry’s war aims. Before Henry appears, the Archbishop of Canterbury secretly tells his fellow ecclesiastics that he supports an English invasion of France because it would financially benefit the church. When the king enters moments later with his nobles, he asks for the Archbishop’s counsel on the justness of his dynastic claim to France:

My learned lord, we pray you to proceed
And justly and religiously unfold
Why the law Salic that they have in France
Or should, or should not, bar us in our claim. . . .
[T]ake heed how you impawn our person,
How you awake our sleeping sword of war.

The Archbishop lays out a long-winded and somewhat inscrutable legal-dynastic basis for Henry’s claim. Wanting a more concise answer, Henry follows up with a simpler question: “May I with right and conscience make this claim?” The Archbishop, who we already know has a corrupt motivation, goes so far as to accept all blame if his counsel is wrong: “The sin upon my head, dread sovereign.”

Henry is here asking for the medieval equivalent of professional expert advice on a question of international law, and he benefits from the church’s moral authority when he receives the answer he surely expected. While modern-day advisers to the president do not explicitly offer to take the “sin” of a given action upon themselves, a similar dynamic can exist today when subordinate military, policy, or legal advisers’ opinions prove central in portraying the legality or appropriateness of a particular foreign-affairs or security decision. A few high-profile examples from the past two decades include Office of Legal Counsel memos and senior military officials’ statements regarding enhanced interrogation techniques and the targeted killings of Anwar al-Awlaki and Qasem Soleimani. And then there was Colin Powell’s speech in support of the 2003 invasion of Iraq: It is fair to say that the deference he received stemmed more from his perceived expertise and moral authority as a famous retired general than from his then-current role as secretary of state. This was not surprising given that the military is one of the few institutions in America today that public opinion appears to hold in high regard. From George H.W. Bush’s decision to end the first Gulf War after 100 days onward, most presidents have relied on the expertise of “commanders on the ground” in determining when to end a campaign: Is this not a version of “the sin upon my head”?

This is not to suggest that such statements or opinions given by these recent American experts are cynical or financially self-serving, as the Archbishop’s appears to be in Henry V. Rather, decision-making in these matters in our day entails a complex interplay between the president, senior subordinates, and their attendant experts in determining the advisability or appropriateness of a given action. The reality of moral responsibility for senior decision-makers is not as simple as a unitary “buck-stops-here” model. Perhaps Henry V highlights that the nature of these “unequal dialogues” may be less modern or bureaucratic than one might assume.

A final comparison on these lines: Henry’s reliance on the Archbishop to sell his war and his thankful public acknowledgment of the Archbishop for his
Henry openly expresses doubts as to the legitimacy of his claim to the English throne, which would raise questions about any derivative claim he might make to France.

Counsel is reminiscent of President Lyndon Johnson’s public acknowledgment of his senior civilian and military advisers minutes before announcing an escalation in Vietnam—advisers who, in the words of H.R. McMaster, “made possible [Johnson’s] deceit and manipulation of Congress and the American people.”

Immediately after his exchange with the Archbishop, Henry speaks with the French ambassador. Henry places the responsibility of his imminent invasion on the French prince who sent Henry an insulting “treasure” chest full of tennis balls:

[T]his mock of his  
Hath turned his balls to gun-stones, and his soul  
Shall stand sore chargèd for the wasteful vengeance  
That shall fly with them; for many a thousand widows  
Shall this his mock mock out of their dear husbands,  
Mock mothers from their sons, mock castles down.

Much later in the play, on the eve of battle, Henry disguises himself as a common soldier and speaks with his men as they nervously await the dawn. We hear the thoughts of two soldiers. One questions the justness of the king’s cause, and another replies that the justness of the king’s cause is “more than we should seek after, for we know enough if we know we are the King’s subjects. If his cause be wrong, our obedience to the/ King wipes the crime of it out of us.”

But the other soldier is not satisfied:

But if the cause be not good, the King Himself  
Hath a heavy reckoning to make, when all those legs and arms and heads, chopped off in a battle,  
shall join together at the latter day, and cry all  
“We died at such a place[,]”

For his part, Henry evasively changes the subject from his own responsibility for the war to the responsibility his soldiers bear for their own eternal souls:

[I]f a servant, under his master’s command transporting a sum of money, be assailed by robbers and die in many irreconciled iniquities, you may call the business of the master the author of the servant’s damnation. But this is not so. The King is not bound to answer the particular endings of his soldiers … Besides, there is no king, be his cause never so spotless … can try it out with all unspotted soldiers. … Every subject’s duty is the King’s, but every subject’s soul is his own.

Audiences familiar with the history play preceding this one—Henry IV, Part 2—may have yet further doubts as to the legitimacy of Henry’s claim, or his own belief in his claim. Henry V’s father, the ailing Henry IV, had counseled his son to take a “wag the dog” approach to calming domestic English politics: “Be it thy course to busy giddy minds / With foreign quarrels.” Further, in his soliloquy on the eve of battle, imploring God for his support, Henry openly expresses doubts as to the legitimacy of his claim to the English throne, which would seem to raise questions about any derivative claim he might make to France.

As the campaign progresses in Henry V, we see Henry use terrifying threats of mass slaughter against the French populace to achieve their surrender. During the siege of Harfleur, prior to ordering an assault on a breech in the town walls, Henry demands surrender by Harfleur’s governor and warns him that it is the town’s last chance to surrender peacefully:

The gates of mercy shall be all shut up,  
And the fleshted soldier, rough and hard of heart,  
In liberty of bloody hand, shall range  
With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass  
Your fresh fair virgins and your flow’ring infants.  
What is it then to me if impious war,  
Arrayed in flames like to the prince of fiends,  
Do with his smirched complexion all fell feats  
Enlinked to waste and desolation? . . .  
Take pity of your town and of your people  
Whiles yet my soldiers are in my command,  
Whiles yet the cool and temperate wind of grace  
O’erblows the filthy and contagious clouds  
Of heady murder, spoil, and villainy.  
If not, why, in a moment look to see  
The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand  
Desire the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters,  
Your fathers taken by the silver beards  
And their most reverend heads dashed to the walls,  
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes
While the mad mothers with their howls confused
Do break the clouds...

That overwhelmingly brutal threat is never carried out. The town surrenders immediately and Henry orders his army to “use mercy to them all.” His own words implicitly recognize the evil of what he is threatening—“murder, spoil, and villainy”—though he rhetorically shifts the onus to Harfleur, his soldiers, and “impious war” itself. Because the town surrenders, the audience is left to wonder how horrible of a slaughter Henry might have allowed—was he ready to rape and kill everyone, or was it just a clever tactic to ensure swift capitulation that would save lives?

The formal structure of the play uses the hagiographic speeches declaimed by its Chorus to frame Henry as a conquering hero. The Chorus refers to Henry as a paragon, “the mirror of all Christian kings,” but the actions he takes muddy that view. Paul Cantor of the University of Virginia describes Henry V as Shakespeare's Machiavellian solution to Christian kingship, a leader who combines the appearance of piety with the ruthless effectiveness necessary for success in war and politics. The late Norman Rabkin, who taught at Berkeley, sees that tension as an unresolved duality in Henry's character, but if one views the duality through Cantor's lens, that duality is actually evidence of Henry's conscious ability to turn off and on his different personas as needed.

Harold Bloom calls Henry a “great Shakespearean personality,” one who is “veiled rather than complex.” He writes that “a king is necessarily something of a counterfeit, and Henry is a great king.” Henry's veiled nature is exactly what makes him an effective ruler, Cantor argues: Henry does not bask in his sins, as does Shakespeare's great villain Richard III. Machiavelli's prince does not revel in his own ruthlessness; on the contrary, he outwardly conforms to society's moral expectations as much as possible. Henry offers a glimpse of this in the swift justice he dispenses on Bardolph, a soldier in his army who steals a metal tablet—a “pax”—from a church. Even though Henry knows Bardolph personally, he approves of the thief's execution by hanging and issues what amounts to a general order to his army:

We would have all such offenders so cut off; and we give express charge that in our marches through the country there be nothing compelled from the villages, nothing taken but paid for, none of the French upbraided or abused in disdainful language; for when lenity and cruelty play for a kingdom, the gentler gamester is the soonest winner.

Paul Cantor suggests that Shakespeare was portraying a historical transition in the conduct of war. The English soldiers were mostly commoner foot soldiers whereas the French army was largely made up of mounted knights. Misbehavior by knights in Henry's time would have been dealt with in courts of chivalry, but a modern army of citizen-soldiers required a king's martial justice. In Bardolph's case, Henry's uncle, the Duke of Exeter, had sentenced Bardolph to hang; Henry learns of Bardolph's sentence a few lines later and expresses his approval.

Henry could merely have quietly affirmed Bardolph's sentence and continued on his way, but he chooses to use this instance of king's justice to display to his army, and indirectly to the local populace, that he is a just Christian king, one who cares for his new French subjects as well. Justice and military discipline's value to the politician and commander is propagandistic as well as practical. Shakespeare presumably intends the irony of Bardolph's hanging for a stolen pax, critics have noted, since Henry himself could be said to have stolen the pax of an entire country.

Scholars have cited Henry's “lenity” approach toward the French people, the threatened slaughter of Harfleur, and his order to kill battlefield prisoners as contrasting examples of Henry's Machiavellian approach in finding a precise admixture of fear and kindness, or ruthlessness and mercy, to achieve his aims. Just because Henry's approach might be Machiavellian, that does not mean his ultimate aims are wrongful; an effective Machiavellian approach can be consonant with the pursuit or achievement of the common good. Cantor argues that Shakespeare's Henry V is the author's attempt to come up with a portrait of as good a king as could be possible given the inherently tragic nature of politics—as an acknowledgment that a "good" king may have to commit evil acts out of necessity.
While Henry consistently seeks to relieve himself of blame for his more unpleasant actions, he does not simultaneously relinquish the power to take those actions.

Most controversial among his actions in the play are Henry's two orders during the battle of Agincourt to kill all of his army's French prisoners. These troubling scenes are often left out of stage and film productions; Both Olivier's movie and Kenneth Branagh's significantly darker 1989 version omit Henry's orders. It's not clear why Henry gives the order twice, each within a different scene, and the text is silent on how to portray them on stage, if at all. Some critics have argued that Henry's first order is merely an expression of anger in the heat of battle and that the order is not actually followed; others have suggested that the common soldiers taken prisoner are killed after the first order while the nobles are initially spared for their ransom value, but then are subsequently killed after the second. Henry's stated reason for his first order is that the French army was reforming to renew its attack, implying that his much smaller army could not both fight a renewed French attack and guard its many prisoners at the same time. In other words, an expedient tactical decision.

But Henry couches his second order to kill the prisoners in the language of revenge. The French have just raided the English baggage train and killed all the noncombatant English boys that had been left there. One of Henry's soldiers praises him upon hearing the second order: “The King, most worthily, hath caused every soldier to cut his prisoner's throat. O, 'tis a gallant king!” But this dubious justification is undermined by the sequence of events. Henry learns of the slaughter of the English boys only after he gives his first order to kill the prisoners. Thus, commentators have argued that his second order to kill the prisoners might be nothing more than an effort to provide a post hoc justification for their killing.

But while Henry continually tries to shift the responsibility for his decisions onto others, we hear in his soliloquy the night before the battle that he recognizes that the weight of war rests, ultimately, “upon the king.” So while Henry consistently seeks to relieve himself of blame for his more unpleasant actions (a normal enough political goal), he does not simultaneously relinquish the power to take those actions. Shakespeare's Henry V is an effective Machiavellian ruler in part because of this ability.

In the end, despite all of Henry's successful political and military maneuverings, the Chorus's epilogue reminds us that success in war and politics is fleeting. Even the best possible king is no match for the contingency of human affairs and his own mortality. Henry dies soon after the play concludes, and his successors, we are told, “lost France and made his England bleed.” The play that begins casting doubt on the morality of the action we are about to witness concludes with an expression of the limits of success, even for the king who “greatly lived” as the “star of England.”

Shakespeare's Henry V portrays both the allure and terror of war in a way that is still compelling four centuries after its first performance, and it serves as an enduring lesson in the politics of war. In the character of Henry V, Shakespeare created a “peerless charismatic”—to use Harold Bloom's epithet. He is a king who draws his subjects and the audience in and makes us complicit. Even if his actions are chilling, we do not really want to blame him.
We have tee shirts. We have tote bags. We have sweatshirts.

AT LAST!

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How can a book filled with anger, a book about anti-Semitism and entitled People Love Dead Jews, be delectable at the same time? The novelist Dara Horn has done it, combining previously published pieces in a work that is far greater than the sum of its parts.

Horn’s target is a world obsessed with dead Jews, whether found in Holocaust memorials, the rebuilding of old and abandoned synagogues and cemeteries, or in assigning students the reading of The Diary of Anne Frank. Jews, she writes, are “part of a ridiculously small minority that nonetheless played a behemoth role in other people’s imaginations,” both here and in countries where they have faced persecution and even extermination. As Horn observes of some high-school girls she met in Nashville when she was 17: “Like most people in the world, they had only encountered dead Jews: people whose sole attribute was that they had been murdered, and whose murders served a clear purpose, which was to teach us something. Jews were a people who, for moral and educational purposes, were supposed to be dead.”

The center of this book is Horn’s absolute rejection of all that ostensibly heartfelt, morally significant, admirable concern about dead Jews. “I had mistaken the enormous public interest in past Jewish suffering for a sign of respect for living Jews,” she writes, but it is not so. She concludes that “even in its most apparently benign and civic-minded forms,” it is “a profound affront to human dignity.” People Love Dead Jews explains why, and does so in colloquial, even conversational language with sparkling insights about Jewish life. At root, Horn says that this obsession with dead Jews distorts not only Christian but also, and perhaps more painfully, Jewish understanding of Jewish reality.

Her take on the rebuilding of abandoned synagogues and houses and rubbed cemeteries in places where Jews no longer live gives the sense of her argument: “There is a tourist industry concept, popular in places devoid of Jews, called ‘Jewish Heritage Sites.’ It is a much better name than ‘Property Seized from Dead or Expelled Jews’.” And using the tourist industry’s “Heri-
“Dara Horn’s insights are the kind only a novelist can bring, transforming the comforting lessons of the usual Anne Frank story into a searing expression of a life extinguished—6 million times.”

The Yiddish book told the same story as Night, but it exploded with rage against his family’s murderers and, as the title implies, the entire world whose indifference (or active hatred) made those murders possible.” The revised and sanitized version earned a Nobel and perhaps an even greater prize: selection for Oprah’s Book Club. Horn goes to an exhibit about the Holocaust at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, where, “at the end of the show, on-screen survivors talk in a loop about how people need to love one another.” But she says this concept never appears once in the survivor literature she has read in Yiddish, “the language of 80 percent of victims.” As she notes acidly, “love rarely comes up; why would it?” She is furious at “being lectured by a novelist” and her 10-year-old keeps saying, “pause it,” and she has to explain. As they listen to it in the car, she finds herself defending the Yiddish book, Horn never loses her ability to see in new and fascinating ways what so many others have worked over for decades. Horn’s discussion of Anne Frank is a good example, for what sparks her ire is the most well-known Holocaust novel—a book revered and respected around the world whose indifference (or active hatred) made those murders possible.

ORN INSISTS that Jews today very often accept, knowingly or not, all the wrong lessons about hatred of Jews—from Anne Frank to Shakespeare. In a wonderfully comic chapter called “Commuting with Shylock,” she recounts what happens when her 10-year-old son comes across The Merchant of Venice. As they listen to it in the car, she finds herself defending the play—of course. It’s Shakespeare. It is only as they hear it line by line, and her 10-year-old keeps saying “pause it,” and she has to explain.

Horn does is write Frank’s obituary—had she not been betrayed, and then murdered by the Nazis. It begins: “Anne Frank, noted Dutch novelist and essayist, died this past Wednesday at her home in Amsterdam. She was 92.” On it goes, discussing the un-murdered Frank’s novels and her journalism, her reporting on Soviet oppression, the Arab–Israeli wars, and the Israeli capture of Adolf Eichmann. This is the kind of insight only a novelist can bring, transforming the comforting lessons of the usual Anne Frank story into a searing expression of a life extinguished—6 million times.

The overwhelming reality of the unavenged murder of innocents, along with cries of anguish, rage, and, yes, vengeance.”

Unknown to most American readers of Elie Wiesel’s famous account of the Holocaust in his book Night is that “Wiesel first published the memoir in Yiddish. But even in these sections of the book, Horn never loses her ability to amuse, if sometimes with very black humor. Of that museum show, for example, she writes, “The exhibition is relentless. After an hour and a half, I marveled that I was barely past Kristallnacht. What the hell is taking so long? I found myself thinking...Can’t they invade Poland already?” And she never loses her ability to see in new and fascinating ways what so many others have worked over for decades. Her discussion of Anne Frank is a good example, for what sparks her ire is the most well-known Holocaust novel—a book revered and respected around the world whose indifference (or active hatred) made those murders possible.” The revised and sanitized version earned a Nobel and perhaps an even greater prize: selection for Oprah’s Book Club. Horn goes to an exhibit about the Holocaust at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, where, “at the end of the show, on-screen survivors talk in a loop about how people need to love one another.” But she says this concept never appears once in the survivor literature she has read in Yiddish, “the language of 80 percent of victims.” As she notes acidly, “love rarely comes up; why would it?” She is furious at “being lectured by a novelist” and her 10-year-old keeps saying, “pause it,” and she has to explain.

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Commentary

Do Jews Count?

**Jews Don’t Count**
**By David Baddiel**
TLS Books, 123 pages

Reviewed by
**Kenneth L. Marcus**

LAST MAY, Zoom-bombers hijacked a Stanford University townhall and broadcast racist messages that displayed images of swastikas and weapons and made use of the N-word. This incident caused widespread distress, including among Stanford’s Jewish community. Nevertheless, the diversity committee at Stanford’s psychological counseling division decided to omit mention of anti-Semitism in its post-mortem of the incident so as not to overshadow anti-black racism.

To be clear, Stanford’s diversity experts do not avoid Jewish issues altogether. In January of this year, diversity trainers described how Jews are connected to white supremacy. Another has boasted that she takes an anti-Zionist approach to social justice. Jewish staff have reported being pressured to attend the diversity and inclusion pro-

But what about the culture of Hasidism, she asks, “with its devotion to ordinary, everyday holiness—or Misnagdism…whose energy in the years before the war was channeled into the rigorous study of musar, or ethics”? What about those whose lives were dedicated to righteousness, not art and culture? “For them, there were no Varian Frys.” She concludes, “I could not help wishing that instead of an emergency rescue committee saving Europe’s greatest artists, that there had been an emergency rescue committee saving Europe’s greatest prophets—that perhaps what should have been saved was not more of the culture of Europe, but more people like Varian Fry.”

What ties these chapters together is Horn’s insistence that Jews have drawn so many wrong lessons about themselves and the societies in which they live—or more sharply put, *from* the societies in which they live, occluding the real lessons that must be drawn about how Jews have lived and died. In the end, for Horn, there is one clear way to understand the past, and it is Judaism: the source of far truer lessons. The many pop-culture books on the Holocaust come to false happy endings; here, Horn’s own happy ending is quite different. She joins in *Def Yomi*, studying a page of Talmud each day along with tens of thousands of other Jews around the world. Here, memory of the past never fades. Here, as each generation seeks to understand righteousness and holiness, “I turn the page and return, carried by fellow readers living and dead, all turning the pages with me.” At turns caustic and comic, at others filled with outrage, *People Love Dead Jews* will also have readers turning the pages with her. 

Every scene, that she finally sees it all through him. Hearing the “Hath not a Jew eyes” soliloquy, she suggests to her son that that’s the good part, where Shakespeare humanizes Shylock. He listens carefully, she hits pause, and he says: “That was pathetic. That’s it! That totally sucked!” A rueful Horn writes, “I have a doctorate in literature. I am aware that Shakespeare’s plays contain many layers and mean many things. But the degrading hideousness of this character is obvious even to a ten-year-old….Why, I wondered, should I feel obligated to excuse this blindingly obvious fact, like some abused wife explaining why her darling husband beat her up?”

This theme of seeing again what we have been forced to see as virtue is laced through *People Love Dead Jews*. Horn writes a long and fascinating chapter on Varian Fry, who saved scores of Jewish lives in 1940–41 as the representative in France of the “Emergency Rescue Committee” formed by American intellectuals and artists. Here again, Horn derives a very different lesson from the usual simple accolades—a lesson, again, on how Jews have come to think about their history. Fry’s mission was to rescue what he called “the culture of Europe.” And in a way he did: In addition to then-famous and now little-known writers such as Lion Feuchtwanger and Franz Werfel, he helped save Hannah Arendt, Max Ernst, and Marc Chagall. Horn offers a fascinating look at the psychological interaction between rescued and rescuer (trying to explain the frequent ingratitude), but that is not her point. It is rather that Jews, like Christians, accept at once that this was a noble mission—that such artists, writers, and intellectuals were the “culture of Europe” and therefore worth saving while others died.

Do Jews Count?
gram's racially segregated “whiteness accountability” affinity group, created for “staff who hold privilege via white identity” and “who are white identified” and “may be newly grappling with or realizing their white identity, or identify as or are perceived as white presenting or passing (aka seen as white by others even though you hold other identities).”

This phenomenon is well-described by British comedian David Baddiel in *Jews Don’t Count*. Baddiel begins with the story of Holly Baddiel in *Antkind* (2020) for providing only a “white-male-cis-het perspective.” Williams didn't mention that Kaufman is Jewish and that his narrator, B. Rosenberg Rosenberg, is “Jewish-looking” with a “rabbinical beard” and is addressed as “Jew” and subjected to such greetings as “F**k you, Hebrew.” For the reviewer, *Antkind* presents only a “white-dude inner life.”

The problem, as Baddiel describes through such examples, is that Jewish identity is erased in progressive circles. This can be gleaned easily enough in discussions of “cultural appropriation.” Google “cultural appropriation food” and one finds outrage about affronts to Chinese, Indian, or Caribbean culture. But when one adds “Jewish,” one finds only articles chastising Jews for appropriating Palestinian foods. Baddiel finds not a single blog post, article, or tweet about the appropriation of bagels, chopped liver, chicken soup, or corned beef.

Similarly, Jewish actors are criticized for playing other minorities, but no one is criticized for playing a Jew. Scarlett Johansson was blasted for accepting the role of a trans sex worker. Gal Gadot was slammed for agreeing to play Cleopatra, the Ptolemaic queen. By contrast, Al Pacino, Gary Oldman, John Turturro, and countless other non-Jews have played Jewish characters without public protest. The question is not whether it should be acceptable for these actors to play Jewish characters. The question is: Why the double-standard?

Baddiel goes further, maintaining that non-Jewish actors get away with performing in “Jewface.” This is personal for Baddiel, who has been criticized for his blackface impression of a British soccer player on British television. Baddiel does not defend his own use of blackface but argues that a double standard applies to Jews. His example is Al Pacino in the Amazon Prime series *Hunters*. The point, Baddiel emphasizes, is not that Pacino wears any obvious Jewish makeup when he plays a Jewish character, “except a beard, and little glasses, and his costume, a black rabbinical suit.” The point rather is that he plays the character, in Baddiel’s phrase, “really f**king Jewishly” (emphasis omitted).

When Jews speak about anti-Semitism, others, including progressive non-Jews, feel no compunction about telling Jews that what they have experienced is not racist. This begins with the assumption that Jews are white. But, as Baddiel argues, “Jews are not white. Or not quite. Or at least they don’t always feel it.” Jews are not safe from prejudice, dispossession, and mistreatment. The irony is that white supremacists generally see Jews as non-whites, even as perpetrators of the white race. According to this Law of Schrödinger’s Jew, Jews are either white or non-white depending on the politics of the observer. That is to say, Jews tend to assume the appearance of whatever group the observer most dislikes: white (even “hyper-white,” as some have put it) to the progressive anti-racists but non-white to the Aryan supremacists.

Author Ben Freeman made the same point when he coined the term “erasive anti-Semitism,” which refers to erasing Jewish identity or denying Jewish victimhood. The former is when you insist that B. Rosenberg Rosenb erg is nothing but a “white dude.” The latter is when you say that anti-Semitism should not be addressed at Stanford. Daphna Kaufman expanded on Freeman’s article in a March 2021 Reut Center policy paper. Kaufman explains that erasive anti-Semitism unfolds in three steps. First, it denies Jews and Jewish communities the right to self-define and to present their own narrative. This can be seen, for example, when progressives reject the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s Working Definition of Anti-Semitism in favor of other statements, such as

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the Jerusalem Declaration, which downplay the relationship between anti-Zionism and Jew-hatred. Next, Jews are blamed for the discriminatory power structure that the progressive movement opposes, building upon age-old stereotypes of Jewish power, conspiracy, and control. Finally, the process neutralizes Jewish voices on anti-Semitism, challenging the legitimacy of Jewish advocacy. This can be seen when anti-Israel activists are described as “human-rights organizations,” while Jewish civil-rights groups are dismissively labeled “the Israel lobby.”

Disappointingly, many Jews participate in their own erasure, especially if they are eager for acceptance into elite circles. It was, after all, Jewish labor union leader Randi Weingarten who castigated American Jews for becoming “part of the ownership class” and, worse, for wanting “to take [the] ladder of opportunity away from those who do not have it.” It should be noted here that B. Rosenberg Rosenberg repeatedly denies that he is Jewish. The fact is, as Charlie Kaufman’s readers know, Rosenberg is clearly Jewish but, like too many Jews, is ashamed and conflicted about his identity. He may prefer to view himself as vanilla, but this reflects only his own ambivalence. Those who observe Rosenberg will see him in very different ways, depending not on his prejudices but their own. And where that leads is not hard to foresee, whether in Kaufman’s novels or on the college campus.5

The Premonition: A Pandemic Story
BY MICHAEL LEWIS
W.W. Norton, 304 pages

Reviewed by
SIMON WASSERBERGER

WHEN atheists mock the faithful, they often point to biblical contradictions such as the conflicting Genesis stories. If Adam and Eve were indeed the first couple, who lived in the Land of Nod? Or, as Henry Drummond says of Cain’s wife in Inherit the Wind, “now where the hell did she come from?”

In The Premonition, Michael Lewis’s new book, the “she” is Charity Dean, of California. As the book begins, Dean is the assistant director of the California Department of Public Health, and she is here to shake our faith in America’s pandemic response. It’s the word “assistant” that matters. Dean is not in charge of anything. But she is one of those preternatural doers whose stories Lewis loves to tell in his wildly popular books (among them Moneyball, The Big Short, and The Blind Side).

Dean, along with Carter Mecher of the Veterans Administration, is the leading figure in what Lewis calls a “rogue group of patriots who were working behind the scenes to save the country.” Save America, that is, from its own government’s mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic. While Donald Trump’s COVID Task Force is giving its daily briefings, Dean and Mecher are toiling in the Land of Nod. Dean takes to Mecher immediately because “he wasn’t some slick White House dude. He was like a guy in a t-shirt with motor oil under his fingernails.” The very language Lewis uses to punch up his heroes is shot through with anti-establishmentarianism. His rogue group of patriots practices “Redneck Epidemiology,” and they call themselves “Wolverines” in reference to the rebellious teenagers in the movie Red Dawn.

But they’re not really rogues, in truth. This informal network, held together by emails and Zoom calls, grew quickly to include members of the Department of Homeland Security, Trump’s COVID Task Force, even Anthony Fauci. Lewis celebrates their outsider status but also describes a good-faith elite meritocracy that allows their voices to carry through. In what other country could an “assistant director” circumvent her direct superior (the incompetent Sonia Angell, who had been given the top job as a reward for her work on “righting racial injustice in health care”) and report directly to her state’s governor?

THE PREMONITION is a thrilling and sobering account, but it doesn’t necessarily tell the story Lewis thinks he’s telling. By the time the COVID Task Force had been established on January 29, 2020, Dean and Mecher had concluded the worst.
Extreme measures, including lockdowns, would be vital to stopping a virus that was already spreading out of control. There was a lag of six to seven weeks between when we “should have known” and when we finally acted that was agonizing to those who were trying to sound the alarm. If the Wolverines had been in charge, lives would have been saved.

For Lewis, our failure is a simple matter of “the record.” He writes that “the United States, with a bit more than 4 percent of the world’s population, had a bit more than 20% of its COVID-19 deaths.” But before we accept this narrative, already so entrenched as to be taken for granted, it seems fair to pause here and ask: Are we certain that the response was a failure? After all, the United States is the most obese country on Earth (other than a handful of tiny island nations). We outpace countries of comparable economic size in most comorbidities, such as heart disease, respiratory disease, and diabetes.* We are, in fact, among the world’s most welcoming COVID hosts. And yet our death rate from COVID (1.8 percent) compares more than favorably with Germany’s and the United Kingdom’s (2.4 percent) and is comparable to France’s (1.9 percent). Given our unhealthy population, is it possible that we punched above our weight?

This question matters little to Lewis, or to the families of the 620,000 Americans who have died of COVID. They have a right to ask what could have been done better, and Lewis has an answer. “Better,” for the most part, would have meant “faster.” The Premonition walks us through the terrifying math of exponential infection. With a long incubation period, dying while they waited for even a speeded-up vaccine?”

A plan was drafted—and then promptly forgotten with the transition to the Obama administration. Carter Mecher had been one of the officials tasked with helping to sell the pandemic strategy, but it “had been swept away.” The threat of institutional amnesia is one of the implicit themes of The Premonition—which, taken as a whole, is a powerful brief against a centralized pandemic response. Lewis’s account is a catalogue of the perils of consolidating the pandemic response into too few hands. This theme, however, is one that seems to make Lewis oddly uncomfortable.

The White House itself is mostly off stage. Donald Trump appears only occasionally and is faulted for doing harm to the national mobilization. Even so, Trump is not the villain of The Premonition. No, the Centers for Disease Control is the main target of Lewis’s ire.

As portrayed here, the CDC is guilty of every clichéd rendering of bureaucratic ineptitude, careerism, and risk aversion. From her first encounter with the CDC, while tracing a hepatitis-C infection in Santa Barbara, Dean is appalled. Is the CDC a research facility or our primary agent of containment, as its name implies? According to Dean, “the CDC did many things. It published learned papers on health crises, after the fact. It managed, very carefully, public perception of itself. But when the shooting started, it leapt into the nearest hole, while others took fire.”

When COVID-19 strikes, the CDC fails at its first and most important task: testing. Given the long, symptomless incubation period of COVID-19, the availability and prioritization of testing was paramount to stopping the spread. But when 57 Americans were repatriated from Wuhan in the winter

* Peterson Kaiser Family Foundation Health Tracker

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of 2020 and quarantined in Omaha, the CDC not only didn’t test them, it forbade the Global Center for Health Security from conducting its own tests. The CDC also refused to use the word “pandemic,” protected its monopoly of test kits, and withheld data.

The most vicious indictment of the CDC comes from one of its former directors, Bill Foege. In a letter to Robert Redfield, the director under Trump, Foege wrote:

You and I both know that... despite the White House spin attempts, this will go down as a colossal failure of the public health system in this country. The biggest challenge in a century and we let the country down. The public health texts of the future will use this as a lesson on how not to handle an infectious disease pandemic.

Lewis provides plenty of evidence to support this criticism of the CDC, but none to support his claim that “it had allowed itself to be used by the Trump administration.” The invocation of Trump here is gratuitous and relies on a presumption that the former president simply had to have been the root of all problems. But if that is true, why does The Premonition read like a partial vindication of Trump’s instincts, beginning with his distrust of the CDC? Lewis does not delve into the origins of the virus or the World Health Organization’s cozy relationship with the Chinese Communist Party, but time has been increasingly kind to the former president on these matters.

Trump, according to Lewis, “had said that it was every state for itself.” This was not true as a matter of administration policy (ventilators were incepted by the federal government on a massive scale and sent to the states). But it would not have been entirely wrong if it were. Lewis quotes Dean approvingly when she proposes “radical accountability. Government has a role, but its role is to empower the grass roots by giving them data.” In the final analysis, we needed a balance between state and federal roles. Are we not grateful today that Texas was able to end its lockdown before California? That Florida opened its beaches?

Trump is unique among our presidents in his ability to discredit himself. That was never more apparent than during his daily COVID briefings. Still, as awful as his vaudevillian conduct was, even here the criticism went too far. Following his own bout with the virus, Trump was mocked for saying, “Don’t be afraid of COVID. Don’t let it dominate your life.” But was this any more out of touch than FDR’s insistence that we had “nothing to fear but fear itself”? Roosevelt spoke those words in 1933, a year in which unemployment peaked at over 25 percent, and half a million Americans were fleeing the Dust Bowl. American presidents used to be allowed to preach a little optimism without having the world come down on them.

The Premonition is a story about the dangers of authority concentrated in the wrong hands, and about a unique American culture that fosters constructive rebelliousness. What we learn from Michael Lewis, as we often have before, is that America produces and attracts heroic citizens—and after some missteps, it even listens to them.
He sees the moderating influence of the U.S. Constitution as analogous to the practical effect of the Constitution of Knowledge. Just as the former harnesses ambition and faction, channeling both into compromise, so too does the latter demand persuasion and negotiation over what propositions to accept. Both constitutions “are built to institutionalize self-correction” and establish common frameworks while leaving ample room for the varied positions of civil society, faith, and other private belief systems. And, somewhat miraculously, both came into being after millennia of strife, hierarchy, and misery; Rauch quotes social psychologist Jonathan Haidt’s observation that liberal discourse “allows us to function one or two orders of magnitude above our design capacity.” Like the U.S. Constitution, it is a blessing.

The system encodes two related principles originally propounded in Rauch’s 1993 book Kindly Inquisitors: the fallibilist rule that no single person gets the final say on an issue; and second, the empirical notion that there is no sole authority capable of settling a debate. We needn’t aspire to objective truth, he argues, but should instead regard such truth as “an orientation, not a destination.” Along the way, we must nurture the virtues of professionalism, civility, pluralism, and accountability—the raw materials fueling vigorous scientific, academic, and political inquiry.

All of the above is in the first part of the book, which is learned and thoughtful. But Rauch’s analysis of how knowledge has developed magnifies the shortcomings in his treatment of its breakdown.

First, he castigates conservatives for rapidly proliferating trolls, Putin-style propaganda, antivax polemics, Q-Anon conspiracies, and deep-fakes that have begun, to borrow Steve Bannon’s memorable location, to “flood the zone with sh*t.” His disdain for the Trumpists is bounteously evident.

But while the online right undoubtedly bears responsibility for poisoning the factual well, so, too, does the left. In only the past few months, the left has coined, popularized, claimed on the House floor, and amplified through Instagram and Twitter, such patent falsehoods as “the Israelis are committing genocide against the Palestinians” and “trans women are indistinguishable from biological women.” And it was the mainstream media and online left, not the right, that peddled lurid and false Russian-conspiracy accusations against Donald Trump (when the truthful accusations against Trump were bad enough). Rauch seems mostly uninterested in these transgressions.

Indeed, Rauch’s enthusiasm for journalism’s “accountability to truth” obscures how his own discipline has fallen short: A July Pew poll found that only 38 percent of Americans express a great deal of trust in the media, even as a younger generation of journalists, led by CBS News’s Wesley Lowery, expressly eschews objectivity for “moral clarity,” subjectively valorizing woke tropes over hard facts.

Rauch does denounce the group-think, emotional safetyism, and “spirals of silence” on the left that deform otherwise diverse opinions into a monocultural progressive block. Suppressing ideas impairs discourse as much as deluging the public square with falsehoods, as Rauch’s extensive interviews with terrified academics reveal. But, interestingly, in this case, he neglects the ideological policing that has permeated conservative circles. No mention of, say, Representative Liz Cheney, or Southern Baptist leaders who were ousted for insufficient devotion to Trump, or Delta Airlines, boycotted for terminating a frequent-flyer partnership with the NRA, or the other parties effectively cancelled by the right.

Rauch’s game plan for reviving our discourse is a mixed bag of recommendations, none of which is a revelation, some of which are just silly. On a small scale, in our personal and professional lives, we can and should practice his exhortation “to be thick-skinned and to tolerate the emotional bruising” of disagreement. On an institutional scale, the problem can be much more intractable, and here’s where the silliness comes in. Rauch urges “institutionalizing truth-friendliness” online and praises Facebook’s establishment of an oversight board and other platforms’ efforts to label plainly false posts. He claims implausibly that by the end of 2020, “the age of epistemic disregard was over.” In fact, social-media companies’ efforts have done little to diminish disinformation, instead creating myriad other problems, including the prospect of government censorship, as demonstrated by the Biden administration’s July announcement that it has been “flagging problematic posts for Facebook.”

As for cancel culture, he tries to offer some reason for hope. He lauds the efforts of the University of Chicago, Berkeley, Princeton, and Reed College, all of which have redoubled their commitment to “viewpoint diversity and intellectual pluralism” in the face of authoritarian pressure. But these examples unfortunately constitute courageous exceptions to the rule.

Ultimately, it will be only through the consistent, rigorous application of the age-old values Rauch articulates in the early part of his book that we can hope to restore discourse. We must not only thicken our own skins but also gently encourage others to thicken theirs.
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O’er the Fields and Through the Leigh

The two female giants of the Great American Songbook

By Terry Teachout

OLDEN-AGE American songwriting was a man’s game. Without exception, all of the major composers of popular songs who were active in the pre-rock era were men. That was pretty much true of lyricists as well—except for Dorothy Fields (1904–1974) and Carolyn Leigh (1926–1983), both of whom had tricirculated success writing musical-comedy scores, songs for movies, and free-standing pop hits.

Fields also wrote the books for several Broadway shows in collaboration with her brother Herbert, sometimes supplying lyrics as well but often working only on their books, most famously with Irving Berlin on Annie Get Your Gun (1946). Leigh, by contrast, only wrote lyrics and was best known for her pop songs, almost always written with the jazz pianist-composer Cy Coleman, many of which were introduced by such noted singers as Frank Sinatra (“Witchcraft,” 1957), Tony Bennett (“The Best Is Yet to Come,” 1959) and Peggy Lee (“When in Rome,” 1964).

Fields never had a permanent writing partner, working most often with Jerome Kern, Jimmy McHugh, and, later, Coleman, with whom she wrote two hit musicals, Sweet Charity and Seesaw. Other than the fact of her collaboration with Coleman, she seemed at first glance to have little in common with Leigh, whether as a lyricist (their styles were totally different) or as a person (Fields was likable and professional, Leigh spiky and difficult).

Yet beneath the polished surfaces of their contrasting writing styles, Fields and Leigh (both Jewish girls from New York) were cut from the same distinctive cloth of character. As lyricists, they viewed the world—in particular, the world of men—with a bright, knowing sassiness tinged with cynicism that is their shared defining characteristic. And though they wrote believably, even poignantly, of romance, their songs very frequently hint at the fact that men and women in love have been known to do more together when alone than hold hands.

For this reason, it is surprising that they have never been written about in tandem other than in You Fascinate Me So, Andy Propst’s 2015 biography of Coleman. But while there is no biography of Leigh, several books about Fields have been written, the latest of which, Kristin Stultz Pressley’s recently published and very fine I Can’t Give You Anything but Love, Baby: Dorothy Fields and Her Life in the American Musical Theater,* makes no mention of Leigh save in passing. Her absence was a missed opportunity to make a good book even better.

Unlike Leigh, Fields was born into a show-business family. Lew, her father, started out as a vaudeville comedian, half of Weber and Fields, a “dialect act” portraying two immigrants struggling to master English. The act had its heyday at the turn of the 20th century, after which Fields became a theatrical producer.

Young Dorothy longed to go on the stage, too, but Lew forbade it, so she wrote poetry as a stopgap and

* Applause, 212 pages.

Terry Teachout, Commentary’s critic-at-large and the drama critic of the Wall Street Journal, is the author of Satchmo at the Waldorf, a one-man play about Louis Armstrong that has been produced off Broadway and throughout America.
waited for an opportunity to move into lyric writing. It came when, in 1928, she met the composer Jimmy McHugh, an all-purpose tunesmith. They worked together from then until 1935, producing a steady stream of enduring hits, the best remembered of which are “I Can't Give You Anything but Love, Baby” and “On the Sunny Side of the Street.” Then Fields severed their partnership—it is thought that she and McHugh had also been romantically involved, but neither ever admitted it—and started working with a number of other composers in Hollywood and on Broadway. The most distinguished was Jerome Kern, with whom she wrote “A Fine Romance” and “The Way You Look Tonight” for Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers to sing in Swing Time.

One striking thing about Fields’s lyrics is how straightforward and unaffected they invariably sound, a quality singled out for praise by Stephen Sondheim, who admires her work so much that he paid subtle homage to her in “Losing My Mind,” a song from Follies that evokes her style. “What I like best about Dorothy Fields is her colloquialism and her effortlessness,” he has said, a compliment echoed by Fields’s colleagues, among them Betty Comden.* “The marvelous thing about the way Dorothy wrote is that her lyrics were inventive without being tricky,” Comden said. “She didn’t engage in clever wordplay for its own sake. She could do it—but she never compromised her direct, fresh manner of expressing a thought.”

Nowhere are these characteristics more advantageously displayed than in “I Can’t Give You Anything but Love, Baby,” whose immaculate craftsmanship is imperceptible to the casual listener. One hears only a universally intelligible sentiment expressed in deceptively commonplace language: “Dream awhile, scheme awhile, / We’re sure to find / Happiness, and, I guess, / All those things you’ve always pined for.” That is the quality Johnny Mercer had in mind when he made this comparison: “To me she’s like John O’Hara. He had such a terrific ear for dialogue—she has it for lyrics.”

Yet Fields’s colloquialism was also perfectly suited to her adult view of sexuality, which is delightfully embodied in “A Fine Romance.” The first verse, sung by Rogers to Astaire in Swing Time, is the quintessence of her style, at once slangy and elegantly turned—not to mention warm-blooded: “We should be like a couple of hot tomatoes, / But you’re as cold as yesterday’s mashed potatoes.”

* Comden was herself a successful lyricist (from On the Town in 1944 to The Will Rogers Follies in 1991), but all her work was done in tandem with Adolph Green, and it is impossible to separate out what was hers from what was his.

Nancy Andrews, with Carolyn Leigh and Cy Coleman at the original Broadway cast recording of Little Me, 1962 (Photo/Marvin Lichtman)
only golden-age songwriter to have started out as a full-time jazz instrumentalist, an experience that shaped his composing style: His songs are built out of the short, swinging rhythmic phrases that jazzmen call “riffs,” and he also employed with total ease the chromatically altered harmonies of modern jazz.

Leigh’s sharp-witted lyrics meshed with Coleman’s urbanely jazzy style, especially in “Witchcraft” and “I’ve Got Your Number,” written for Little Me (1962), the second of their two Broadway shows, a modest hit in which Sid Caesar played seven roles (the first, Wildcat, a 1961 vehicle for Lucille Ball, had closed after just 171 performances). As is so often the case with Leigh’s songs, “I’ve Got Your Number” has a brash, wised-up quality through whose crackling rhymes the romantic uncertainty that also permeates her ballads is clearly audible: “Oh, yes, you brag a lot, / Wave your own flag a lot. / But you’re unsure a lot, / You’re a lot like me.”

Leigh’s sole limitation as a lyricist was that she had no talent for varied characterization. Once again, Sondheim, a great admirer who believed her to be “the most brilliant technician” of all the golden-age lyricists, nailed it when he wrote that she was “not a stage writer” by nature and wrote not about the characters in a show but about multiple aspects of herself. “Many of her theater songs,” Sondheim said, “could be switched among the show’s characters with little disruption.” This may help to explain why only one of the musicals on which she worked, Peter Pan, has held the stage—and she was not its sole lyricist (Betty Comden and her partner Adolph Green were credited as well). Nor was Leigh easy to work with. Full of longing but irascible in temperament and unlucky in love, she was an unhappy woman and an awkward collaborator. Her partnership with Coleman was dissolved by mutual agreement after Little Me opened, foundering on the rocky shoals of her personality.

She wrote only one show after Little Me, the unmemorable How Now, Dow Jones (1967, music by Elmer Bernstein). Thereafter she fell largely silent before her death in 1983, unable to come to terms with the new sound of American popular music.

That puzzlement had also defeated Fields, who wrote no shows between 1959 and 1966. Then Coleman, Neil Simon, and Bob Fosse, the creative team behind Little Me, invited Fields to take her place as the lyricist for Sweet Charity—the story of a frog-kissing whore with a heart of gold. The resulting show was a colossal success that ran for 609 performances and to which Fields, galvanized by the up-to-date talents of her younger collaborators, contributed glistening lyrics to such showstoppers as “If My Friends Could See Me Now,” “I’m a Brass Band,” and the slyly naughty “Big Spender,” a showcase for her undiminished grasp of the American vulgate: “So let me get right to the point. / I don’t pop my cork for every guy I see.”

In 1973, Fields wrote one more musical with Coleman, Seesaw, but even though the show was a hit and her contributions were of high quality—an amazing achievement for a 68-year-old lyricist—the excellent score produced no standards. The ubiquity of rock had long since blocked the way to mass popularity for such golden-age-style show tunes as were still being written. Not that it mattered: Fields had long since established herself as one of the masters of American popular song, and her triumphant late-life success in Sweet Charity made her part of one of the last traditional Broadway musicals to enter the permanent repertory (it opened two years after Fiddler on the Roof and two years before Hair).

Would that the identically talented Carolyn Leigh had lived longer and won more lasting popular recognition, for she deserved it. But Dorothy Fields, whose extraordinary career spanned nearly a half-century, will always be ranked alongside Berlin, Porter, Lorenz Hart, Oscar Hammerstein, and Johnny Mercer—and Carolyn Leigh—as one of the immortal giants of the American songbook.

As is so often the case with Carolyn Leigh’s songs, ‘I’ve Got Your Number’ has a brash, wised-up quality through whose crackling rhymes the romantic uncertainty that also permeates her ballads is clearly audible.
HOLLYWOOD COMMENTARY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 72  the same. Gomer Pyle was a cheerful, friendly, upbeat hick from North Carolina who managed, somehow, to remain happily stateside while his comrades were shipped off to Da Nang. *Mayberry RFD*—a spinoff of the hugely successful *Andy Griffith Show*—was a rosy-hued look at southern rural America that somehow managed not to depict any of the things 1960s-era Americans associated with southern rural America, such as racism and terrifying sheriffs.

The bulk of the soft-edged country comedies were on CBS, and by the late 1960s, the network’s programmers knew that the audience was looking for something a little more real. So writers and producers began pitching contemporary, “relevant” shows to the network about the world around them: a world in which families were hotbeds of internal political struggles (draft dodgers and Nixon voters were living under the same roof) and single women were out of the kitchen and into the workplace.

The result was an astonishing cascade of comedy hits—*All in the Family*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Maude*—that depicted the broad, unruly canvas of the time. Even *M*A*S*H*, which was technically about the futility and pointlessness of the Korean War, spoke to an audience contending with the futility and pointlessness of the Vietnam War.

As the CBS brass in 1968, and Tom Wolfe 20 years later, discovered, there’s a fortune to be made in telling it like it is. Television executives in 2021, though, are still in their apartment. “Do you have anything,” my agent asked me a few weeks ago, “that might fit into a *Ted Lasso*–ish category?”

*Ted Lasso* is a brilliantly funny, upbeat comedy from Apple TV that has been nominated for dozens of Emmys and is the current heartthrob of every executive in the television business. The show is a joyful delight. It tells the story of an American football coach, played by Jason Sudeikis, who finds himself in the UK coaching an English soccer team. With his homespun wisdom and southern twang, there’s more than a hint of Andy Griffith in Sudeikis’s Ted Lasso. Like the famous Sheriff of Mayberry, Ted Lasso doesn’t raise his voice or get in your face—he coaches lightly and gently and with real feeling for his players.

Everyone wants a *Ted Lasso* on his schedule. If you’re tasked with figuring out what the audience wants, it’s a smart move to assume that what they want is something *nice*. The world right now seems so contentious and furious at itself. A few remote clicks away, on cable news, everything seems so calamitous and urgent. Every new story is a Fox News Alert, every few minutes there’s a breathless CNN report about COVID deaths or climate change. On MSNBC, there’s a regular rotation of “experts” who will insist that many of the nation’s governors are guilty of infanticide.

So, sure, *Ted Lasso*. And *Schmigadoon!*—also on Apple TV—a funny and offbeat revamping of the musical *Brigadoon*, which is as winning and charming as *Ted Lasso* and also manages to clear all of the bad things out of your head. There’s a reason why these shows are popular and why executives all over Hollywood are trying to replicate their feel-good success.

On the other hand, *someone* is right this minute getting on the 4 or 5 uptown to take a look at what’s really going on. There are some writers in Hollywood who are trying to capture the moment.

A friend of mine pitched this show to me last week: He and his wife are both working, and child care is expensive. So his mother-in-law helps out during the day to take care of his young kids. For free. Which is terrific.

Except: He and his wife are deeply committed Santa Monica progressives and his mother-in-law is a passionate Trump supporter, so every night they need to reprogram their children from believing that Donald Trump is still, secretly, the president and Hunter Biden is working for the Chinese Communist Party and that the COVID vaccine will turn you into a robot.

“You know,” he said, “she may be crazy—but the price is right.”

Let me clarify: My friend didn’t pitch this to me as a show. He just told me what’s really happening in his house, and I suspect he’s not unique. We all have someone in our family who may watch too much cable news, of either stripe.

I’m the one who turned it into a pitch, even in these *Ted Lasso* days. I’m the one who thinks—and I’m probably wrong, or too early—that what’s happening in the real world, in all of its gaudy, lurid glory is pretty great material.

I’ll let you know if it sells.

**Commentary**

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WHEN TOM WOLFE was working on his blockbuster novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, he was terrified that someone else would write it first.

How could a city full of writers, he wondered, miss what was right in front of them? New York City in the 1980s was a baroque, over-the-top carnival of Page Sixers, crack dealers, lifetime criminals, and nightlife-trash socialites. Wolfe hurried uptown every day to the Bronx courthouse to catch the gloriously unhinged matinee, and each day he was gripped by anxiety. He was convinced that he was about to be scooped. Surely there was an author around—someone younger, with more energy—working the same angle. Surely there was a New York writer who realized all you needed to do to write a juicy bestseller was walk around the city and write down what you see?

Turns out, there wasn’t. Wolfe’s book was a singular smash. He worried needlessly. While he was taking the Uptown 4 or 5 to the courthouse and teaching himself the rudiments of bond trading, most other New York novelists were busy writing novels about New York novelists working on their novels in New York.

Which made sense, because at the time literary critics and professors were caught in the thrall of a literary theory called “Deconstruction,” which teaches (among other nonsense) that the text refers only to itself, that it deconstructs in the reading, that it isn’t really there at all. And if that’s true, why bother leaving the apartment?

From the vantage point of 2021, of course, the 1980s are a sleepy Golden Age. Compared with a worldwide pandemic, Capitol Hill riots, Trump, QAnon, China, Black Lives Matter, and TikTok, the *Bonfire* era seems like very thin material. A fun and lively story that captures the richly insane Brueghel painting that is *America, Autumn 2021* would be a big fat moneymaker.

“Capturing the moment” is television’s job, although it takes its time. Television writers and executives, like Wolfe’s fellow New York writers, are often loath to leave the apartment.

In the 1960s—which still wears the gold in the Crazy Decade Olympics—the top television programs were rural comedies or Westerns. In 1968, after three major assassinations, riots in the streets, and the faltering Vietnam War, the top television programs were: *Bonanza*, *Mayberry RFD*, and *Gomer Pyle, USMC*.

*Laugh-In*, for the record, was the number-one show that year, which is about as real as television was willing to get. *Laugh-In* was to the prevailing youth culture what *Gomer Pyle* was to the Vietnam War: a fun and sanitized repackaging of what was actually some pretty bad news.

On NBC prime time, Goldie Hawn was a ditzy hippie chick in buckskin and go-go boots. On NBC News, that part was played by Squeaky Fromme, the Manson chick.

On CBS, it was

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**HOLLYWOOD COMMENTARY**

All in the Trump Family

**ROB LONG**

Rob Long has been the executive producer of six TV series.
YOU DESERVE TO KNOW THE TRUTH...

The Ugly Truth About Hamas

Hamas attacks on Israel fulfill a terrorist mission to kill Jews and destroy Israel—they don’t support a two-state solution or any form of Israel-Palestinian peace.

Those who oppose Israel’s response to Hamas’s unprovoked attacks usually base their feelings on lies and unsupported assumptions. They ignore Hamas’s true mission and massive, Iran-backed firepower, and embrace false myths about Israel’s regard for Palestinians.

Facts about six false myths

Self-determination for Palestinian Arabs is an admirable goal—one that has always been embraced by Israel. But it’s a mistake to believe that Hamas’s launch of some 4,300 missiles against Israel in the May 2020 war is connected to any quest for peace or to a future Palestinian state. Indeed, sympathy for Hamas’s attacks on Israel is generally based on six false myths about the conflict and a profound misunderstanding of the terror group itself.

1) Hamas is the underdog: In truth, Hamas is supported by heavyweights in the radical Islamist world—Iran, Turkey and Qatar—who send Hamas hundreds of millions of dollars and weapons. Hamas has amassed 14,000 deadly missiles to bomb Israel. This is no weakling.

2) Israel occupies Palestinian territory: Israel retreated entirely from the Gaza Strip in 2005. Hamas exclusively rules that land and its two million people. However, because of Hamas terror attacks, Israel imposed a blockade on the territory in 2007, and Egypt later followed suit.

3) Israel won’t let the Palestinians have a state: Israel has made three peace offers of land and its own state to the Palestinian Authority in the last 21 years, but the PA rebuked them all. Hamas could have built a flourishing state in Gaza, but they have chosen to squander their resources to create terror against Israeli civilians.

4) Hamas is fighting for the Palestinian people: Hamas is a brutal dictatorship that has no functioning relationship or cooperation with the Palestinian Authority (and its two million people) in the West Bank—indeed, the two groups are bitter enemies. Nor does Hamas “represent” Palestinians in Gaza—the people under its rule have not voted for 15 years.

5) Israel is stealing private Palestinian land in Jerusalem: The issue in Jerusalem is a property dispute based upon non-payment of rent on property agreed by its Palestinian residents to be owned by Jews. The case now rests with Israel’s Supreme Court.

6) Israel wants to take over the Al Aqsa mosque: Israel allows Muslims to manage the Temple Mount, and hundreds of thousands of Muslims regularly pray there. Israel has no plans to change this. Jews, however, are forbidden to pray on the Temple Mount, Judaism’s holiest site. In addition to these misconceptions, some mainstream media and other Hamas supporters fail to accurately describe the group. Above all, the media rarely mention that dozens of governments worldwide—including the U.S., European Union and Arab nations—classify Hamas as a terrorist organization.

Hamas’ founding charter bluntly communicates its goals. The charter starts: “Israel . . . will continue to exist until Islam obliterates it, just as it obliterated others before it.” Thus, Hamas is dedicated to the utter destruction of Israel.

The charter also frequently mentions violent Jihad—it has no interest in peace or negotiations—clearly stating: “[Peace] initiatives, and so-called peaceful solutions and international conferences are in contradiction to the principles of the Islamic Resistance Movement.”

Most egregiously, Hamas’s charter spells out its aspiration to kill all Jews: “The Day of Judgment will not come about until Moslems fight Jews and kill them.”

Though many Western progressives defend Hamas, it is a misogynist, anti-LGBTQ, anti-Christian ruler of the Gaza Strip, which it seized brutally in 2007 by throwing opponents from high-rise buildings. Hamas refers to Christians as “infidels.” Christian churches have been targeted and its leaders killed. Ordinary Palestinians suffer most from Hamas. They are violently repressed and used as “human shields”—producing bloody Hamas propaganda pictures to evoke sympathy. While Hamas receives hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign aid, they do not create hospitals, jobs or electricity. Rather, they build thousands of offensive rockets and underground military tunnels.

It’s a lie to imply equivalence between Israel and Hamas. This is not a war between equivalents. It is a war between a genocidal organization that seeks the blood of innocents, against a democratic people defending its homeland from incessant attacks. Anyone who sympathizes with Hamas’s cause—or who objects to Israel’s defensive response to unprovoked aggression—should be called to account for Hamas’s oppressive, murderous behavior.

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