REQUIEM FOR A SUPERPOWER

BRET STEPHENS ON THE POST-PAX-AMERICANA WORLD

ELI LAKE ON THE UNNECESSARY LOSS OF AFGHANISTAN

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# Commentary

October 2021  Vol. 152 : No. 3

## Articles

### REQUIEM FOR A SUPERPOWER

**Bret Stephens**

**The Post-Pax-Americana World**

17

### Giving Up on the Good-Enough War

**Eli Lake**

Why we chose to lose in Afghanistan.

26

### The Bizarre Positive Biden Spin on Afghanistan

**Jonathan Schanzer**

No, the Taliban are not America’s partners.

30

### American Jews: A Threat Report

**Josef Joffe**

Will the changes of the past 20 years be enough to end 350 years of a unique relationship?

35

### Abortion’s Texas Twist

**Adam J. White**

The bad jurisprudence arising from *Roe v. Wade* has come full circle.

40
## Politics & Ideas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abe Greenwald</td>
<td>Systemic Wokeness</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben Shapiro</td>
<td><em>The Authoritarian Moment,</em> by Ben Shapiro</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tal Fortgang</td>
<td>Starr’s Report</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken Starr</td>
<td><em>Religious Liberty in Crisis,</em> by Ken Starr</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare McHugh</td>
<td>Sally Rooney’s Women</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally Rooney</td>
<td><em>Beautiful World Where Are You,</em> by Sally Rooney</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry Teachout</td>
<td>Some Like It Dark</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>On film noir.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Monthly Commentaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><strong>Reader Commentary</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Letters</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>on the July/August issue</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><strong>Tech Commentary</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>James B. Meigs</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The ‘Renewable’ Fallacy and Why I Blame Jimmy Carter</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td><strong>Media Commentary</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Christine Rosen</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The COVID Panic Police</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Washington Commentary</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Matthew Continetti</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Biden the Incompetent</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Jewish Commentary</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Meir Y. Soloveichik</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hannah Senesh at 100</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Hollywood Commentary</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Rob Long</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ratings—and How They Lie</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To the Editor:
I ENJOYED Liel Leibovitz’s “No, Jews Aren’t White” (July/August). Those Jews who believe that social justice is the essence of Judaism—and this includes most of my neighbors and local conservative rabbis—place whiteness above Jewishness. They are frequently embarrassed about Israel and consider Republicans abominations.

Adrian Morchower
Chevy Chase, Maryland

To the Editor:

FOR SOME reason, some Jews think that if they are “good” and assimilate, they will be liked. Such is our unconscious and historical desire to be accepted. When I was growing up in Beverly Hills, I considered it a compliment when told I didn’t look Jewish. Blond and blue-eyed, I learned that being a Gentile was preferable.

Why do I share this personal information? Because for 70 years I didn’t know or care what it meant to be a Jew or understand the importance of Israel. It was only when I learned more about the Shoah and all the history I didn’t know that things changed for me. Most people, Jews and non-Jews, don’t know about or understand the slow process of lies and propaganda that led to the annihilation of so many European Jews. If they did, they would fight with every fiber of their beings whenever they read or hear the abominable lies of the Squad and BLM. They might even proudly stand up for what is right.

Linda Nacif
Los Angeles, California

The Bibi Way

To the Editor:

BRET STEPHENS wrote an impressively detailed article about Benjamin Netanyahu (“The Paradoxes of Benjamin Netanyahu,” July/August). But there’s another angle worth considering in the story of Bibi and Israel. Many analysts tend to magnify the role of leaders in the affairs of state. When looking at Israel, they easily underestimate the Jewish people themselves: enormously competitive and capable. Israel’s success as a start-up nation can be credited to those qualities more than to Netanyahu. Bibi rode this wave and enriched himself in the process. Similarly, the Abraham Accords were in the works in the Israeli foreign ministry before Bibi’s involvement. He reacted to events as they unfolded.

Jonathan Cohen
Albany, New York

October 2021
To the Editor:

IT’S ABOUT TIME a strong Jewish voice, such as Seth Mandel’s, has called out the ADL and Jonathan Greenblatt for driving a wedge between right-leaning and left-leaning Jews (“Jews Who Are Complicit in Jew-Hatred,” July/August). At a time when Jewish solidarity is most needed, Greenblatt’s behavior is simply repulsive. He purposely weakens American support for the only place in the world where Jews can consider themselves safe from murderous political ideologies.

Words of appreciation to COMMENTARY and Seth Mandel are insufficient thanks for finally standing up to the haters in our midst. They must be opposed by all who cherish freedom and Israel’s right to defend itself.

MARK E. HELBRAUN
Closter, New Jersey

To the Editor:

THANK YOU for Seth Mandel’s important report on trends in American and American Jewish politics. This article crystallized what has been merely a collection of shocking news bits and shudder-inducing impressions that I’ve tried to share with other Israelis who, like me, grew up in a very different America.

From this side of the ocean, the collapse of American Jewish organizations into Israel-bashing in an attempt to find favor is reminiscent of the early-20th-century

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From this side of the ocean, the collapse of American Jewish organizations into Israel-bashing in an attempt to find favor is reminiscent of the early-20th-century
Jewish intelligentsia’s attempts to embrace their European-ness. What is most disturbing is that many Israelis are willing to import to Israel these “progressive” American Jewish values, which are based on principles that deny Jewish history, the validity of Jewish identity and Jewish culture, and the legitimacy of the Jewish nation-state. The political importation of these fundamentally suicidal principles to serve short-sighted coalition-building bores ill for the future of Israel, just as the new legitimacy given to this and other anti-Zionist “movements” by anti-Semitic American politicians bores ill for the future of the Jewish community in the United States.

Naomi Linder Kahn
Givat Zeev, Israel

To the Editor:
THANK YOU for Seth Mandel’s article on the problem with Jewish organizations and anti-Semitism. It is an excellent piece and starts a difficult but necessary conversation that the Jewish American community must have. Such a discussion is long overdue.

Laura Kessler
Dayton, Ohio

To the Editor:
I COULD NOT agree more with Seth Mandel. We need to amplify and expand this message. We need to counter and call out the perfidy of the ADL and expose the Protocols of the Elders of Zion rhetoric of the Squad and their allies in the press, pop culture, and media. The Jewish community needs to see exactly what the purportedly Jewish anti-Israel/anti-Zionist groups really are: enablers of the worst kinds of haters. Please continue to shine a light on this darkness in the Jewish community.

Rabbi Moshe Rudin
West Orange, New Jersey

To the Editor:
Roger Bennett has written a very evocative article on growing up in Liverpool. I had a conference in Liverpool a year or two before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and I visited the Princes Road Synagogue. It was closed, but I convinced the receptionist to let me in since I had only a few hours free and was in Liverpool for only two days. The shul was beautiful, and I made sure to purchase the authorized Siddur.

Ben Z. Katz
Chicago, Illinois

Roger Bennett writes:

Ben Katz’s reflection about Princes Road shul is correct. I grew up going there as a kid. With its lavish Moorish Revival style, it is one of Europe’s most beautiful houses of worship. A true secret gem that has been called “the jewel in the crown” of Liverpool’s architecture. Funny thing is, the Liverpool Jewish community is just 3,000 strong, but growing up, I thought it was enormous until I met Americans and they told me stories about New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Miami’s communities. We all take for granted what we have here. But the American Jewish story is a genuine achievement of wonder—not just in the present day, but when judged against the entire flow of Jewish history.

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The ‘Renewable’ Fallacy and Why I Blame Jimmy Carter

JAMES B. MEIGS

ASK ALMOST ANYONE what we should do to make our economy greener and they’ll tell you we need more “renewable energy.” Renewable energy—that’s the goal behind myriad state and federal policies; it is the justification for massive subsidies to certain types of energy production and the rationale for penalizing others. It’s the reason some states (and even some countries) have spent billions on new energy infrastructure, burdened their consumers with sky-high energy costs, and yet made only modest progress bringing down carbon dioxide emissions.

That’s because we’ve been asking the wrong question. The key issue with energy technology is not whether it is renewable—that is, can it be endlessly replenished from natural sources such as sun, wind, and water—but rather whether the technology is clean and whether that clean tech can be deployed at a reasonable price. If we are serious about making our economy cleaner, we should be choosing technologies that deliver the biggest environmental benefit at the lowest possible cost. Too often, in pursuit of the renewable rainbow, we’ve done just the opposite. We burden our energy economy with high prices and complex regulations, all for fairly meager improvements in our environmental footprint.

To understand how we got on the wrong track, we need to go back to those gloomy days of the 1970s. Inflation was raging and optimism tanking. The Population Bomb was a bestseller, while environmentalists stressed “limits to growth.” Many experts believed that the U.S. had already hit “Peak Oil”—that our energy supply had nowhere to go but down. Then came the 1973 OPEC oil embargo, and with it the “Energy Crisis.” Americans faced gas lines, rationing, and fears that they wouldn’t be able to heat their homes. It seemed our very way of life was at the mercy of a handful of Arab petro-states.

In fact, the OPEC embargo played only a small role in the crisis. The real culprit was the price-control regime Richard Nixon had launched in a doomed effort to combat inflation (and in a cynical ploy to ensure his 1972 reelection). With their financial returns capped, domestic drillers and refiners cut back on production. When the embargo hit, they had little incentive to produce more fuel to fill the gap. Even after price controls on most goods expired, gasoline and diesel fuel remained subject to byzantine regulations all through the Ford and Carter years. In 1979, after the Iranian Revolution led to a dip in that country’s oil production, U.S. suppliers were once again unable to ramp up production. The country was in another

James B. Meigs is the former editor of Popular Mechanics, among other magazines, and a co-host of the How Do We Fix It podcast.
oil crunch, by some measures one worse than the first.

Such was the national mood on July 15, 1979, when President Carter settled himself before the TV cameras to give the defining speech of his presidency. It would become known as the “Malaise Speech.” America was facing not just an energy crisis, Carter told the nation, but a spiritual one. The only solution was to put the entire country on something like a war footing. What would we be fighting for? “Energy independence.” Today, many remember Carter as an environmentally minded president—he put solar panels on the White House! But his sweeping energy proposals were couched mostly in the language of economic nationalism. America needed more energy, and we couldn’t trust foreigners to provide it. Indeed, by today’s standards, Carter’s plan—which called for massive increases in coal production and developing dirty oil-shale deposits—was an ecological train wreck.

Carter’s emphasis on renewable energy—mostly wind, solar, hydropower, and biofuels—was driven less by environmental concerns than by economic and geopolitical ones. Renewable energy was a matter of national security, Carter explained while visiting the Colorado lab now known as the National Renewable Energy Research Institute. “Nobody can embargo sunlight,” he said. “No cartel controls the sun. Its energy will not run out.”

When Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, he ditched the White House solar panels. He also scrapped the price controls that were hobbling U.S. energy producers. Domestic oil production recovered, and gasoline prices were soon lower than they’d been in the 1960s. By the mid-’80s, economists were warning of an “oil glut.”

Nonetheless, fears of energy shortages remained. Even after most of Carter’s program faded away, the focus on expanding renewable energy survived. Today, more than half of U.S. states have “Renewable Portfolio Standards.” These regulations require electrical utilities to purchase some set percentage of their power from renewable sources, whether or not those sources are the most affordable or even most environmentally friendly. Higher costs get passed on to ratepayers.

The rules favor wind and solar producers, and they put nuclear power—our biggest and most dependable source of clean energy—at a distinct disadvantage. (Nuclear fuel is plentiful and releases no CO₂, but it is not, technically, renewable.) In fact, between economic headwinds and pressure from antinuclear activists, several perfectly good nuclear power plants—in Vermont, California, New York, and other states—have been forced to close in recent years. Every time that happens, the region’s greenhouse-gas emissions and electricity prices tend to spike.

Not surprisingly, the states that have invested most heavily in renewable energy have seen their electricity costs soar. California residents pay rates 80 percent higher than the national average. What is surprising is how little they have to show for it. California’s statewide carbon emissions have fallen by more than 5 percent since 2000, but that number barely beats the national average. More than half the states in the union did better, some cutting their emissions 20 percent or more. And California’s heavy reliance on wind and solar—whose output swings wildly from day to day and even hour to hour—has made the state’s power grid more fragile and prone to blackouts.

Despite California’s urgent need for reliable clean power, it remains committed to shuttering Diablo Canyon, its last operating nuclear power plant, in 2024. Promises that new wind and solar installations would easily replace the power from that plant have turned out to be empty. In fact, in September the state asked the Biden administration to waive air-pollution restrictions on some of its gas-fired power stations to allow the plants to operate at maximum levels. Without that extra gas power, California will face blackouts.

On the global scene, Germany presents a particularly stark example of why the renewable-only path is so misguided. The country has promised to phase out both fossil fuels and nuclear power, filling the gap with clean wind and solar. This Energiewende program costs Germany some $36 billion per year and has caused electricity prices to double. But at least they’re saving the planet, right? Um, no. Germany’s carbon emissions have barely budged over the past decade. Perhaps no one told the Germans that it might be risky for a cloudy, northerly country to stake its energy security on solar panels. To keep the lights on, Germany has been forced to keep dozens of coal-fired power plants running and to keep mining and importing mountains of dirty coal.

Meanwhile, France, which started investing in nuclear power plants back in the 1960s, is in a much more stable condition. It gets roughly 70 percent of its electricity from nuclear and has one of the lowest rates of carbon emissions in the industrialized world. And guess what? French consumers pay dramatically less for electricity than most of their European neighbors.

The renewable mirage is particularly insidious when it concerns biofuels. Making fuel from corn or grass or trees sounds great. In theory we can keep growing new plants and have an endless supply of energy. That has been the rationale for bulking up our domestic corn-ethanol industry—and forcing U.S. refiners to add 10 percent ethanol to every gallon of gasoline. But many biofuels are wickedly inefficient; by some estimates, 

**Commentary**
it takes more energy to produce a gallon of ethanol than is contained in that gallon of fuel. And corn-based ethanol winds up releasing roughly as much CO₂ as gasoline as well. In Europe, renewable mandates have had even more perverse effects. For years, fuel producers got special credits for employing biofuels, including imported palm oil. The upshot: Thousands of acres of rain forest in Indonesia and Malaysia have been clear-cut and turned into palm-oil plantations. (Only in the past couple of years have most European nations finally curtailed this practice.)

None of this means that renewable energy is inherently bad. Wind and solar (and even, potentially, biofuels) have roles to play in a clean-energy economy. But each needs to be assessed according to its actual merits: Is it efficient? Is it affordable? Is it clean? Favoring a particular energy source simply because it is “renewable” distorts markets and often backfires environmentally.

The key to making wind and solar work is being honest about their strengths and weaknesses. It’s great that wind and solar don’t put any carbon or other pollutants into the atmosphere. And the costs of both technologies have fallen dramatically over recent years. But wind and solar are only cheap when they are actually producing power. In the real world, wind turbines and solar panels produce electricity only about a third of the time. Moreover, the quantity of power they make isn’t determined by the needs of electricity consumers, but by the vagaries of weather. So for every new wind turbine or solar-panel utilities added to the grid, we also need to build some form of reliable backup generation, typically plants that run on natural gas. In effect, relying heavily on wind and solar requires that we build two separate power-generation systems. That’s not cheap.

Renewable advocates often gloss over the true costs of building all the backup power that wind and solar require. Or they envision a world in which the irregular power from these sources could be stored for weeks—or transported across vast distances—to fill the gaps when the wind isn’t blowing or the sun isn’t shining. That’s theoretically possible, but the expense would be astronomical. An MIT engineering study showed that the costs of wind and solar go up dramatically once they become the primary sources of electricity in the grid. The most affordable way to cut emissions, the authors concluded, is to combine renewable power with reliable, low-carbon sources, such as nuclear power.

In other words, the “100 percent renewable” power grid that California, Germany, and other supposedly green pioneers seek won’t work. Unless they want to keep burning coal and natural gas, they are going to need nuclear power. Too bad leading environmentalists in those regions pushed to shut down their nuclear power plants—in part because they aren’t “renewable.” Fortunately, some states have begun rethinking their renewable mandates to include nuclear power and other forms of low-carbon power. (Such sources could also include plants that harness the energy in natural gas, while capturing and storing the CO₂ it releases.)

These Clean Energy Standards focus on the amount of carbon and other pollutants an energy source produces, not on the illusion of renewability.

To its credit, Biden’s energy plan does not completely exclude nuclear power. Nonetheless, his administration seems committed to an industrial-policy approach to energy. It recently unveiled a roadmap to convert nearly half of the U.S. power grid to solar by 2050. Utilities that don’t play ball—or that think they have a better way to reduce emissions—will be penalized. Right now, solar makes up less than 4 percent of U.S. electricity. So this is a massive bet on a single alternative, one with unclear benefits and drawbacks.

Is it best for the environment? Not necessarily. Solar panels require exotic materials that need to be mined, processed, and ultimately disposed of; moreover solar farms require huge amounts of land. Is it the most economical? Only when the sun is shining. A better approach would empower market forces to find the cleanest, cheapest sources of power. Those might vary depending on regional climate and local needs. Instead, the Biden administration wants to impose a one-size-fits-all solar solution. But, hey, it’s renewable.

A smarter policy would be to retire the outdated notion of renewability altogether. The world has changed since Jimmy Carter’s days, yet too many policymakers are stuck in that 1970s mindset. It’s possible to have an economy that is both dynamic and clean. But chasing the unattainable grail of renewability won’t get us there. Let’s move on. 

Wind and solar (and even, potentially, biofuels) have roles to play in a clean-energy economy. But each needs to be assessed according to its actual merits: Is it efficient? Is it affordable? Is it clean? Favoring a particular energy source simply because it is ‘renewable’ distorts markets and often backfires environmentally.

October 2021
ON AUGUST 23, 2021, the Associated Press reported that an astonishing 70 percent of calls to Mississippi’s Poison Control Center were from people who had taken the veterinary medication ivermectin to treat COVID. Similarly alarming news about ivermectin emerged from Oklahoma: *Rolling Stone* headlined its report “Gunshot Victims Left Waiting as Horse Dewormer Overdoses Overwhelm Oklahoma Hospitals, Doctor Says.”

Media personalities such as Rachel Maddow tweeted the alarmist headlines about Oklahoma out to their millions of followers. The narrative was set: Ignorant rural Americans were self-medicating with a horse drug and, because of their foolish behavior, overwhelming the health-care system.

Neither story was true. As Mississippi’s chief epidemiologist, Dr. Paul Byers, noted, the percentage of calls about ivermectin was 2 percent, not 70 percent. And, contrary to reports, he said, “no hospitalizations due to ivermectin toxicity have been directly reported to the Mississippi Poison Control Center or the Mississippi State Department of Health.”

The Oklahoma story proved even more of a reach. The original source, a report from local news station KFOR, included quotes from an Oklahoma doctor named Jason McElyea—who had not worked at the hospital mentioned in the story for several months. He claimed that “the ERs are so backed up that gun-shot victims were having hard times getting to facilities where they can get definitive care and be treated.”

He also mentioned having seen some patients who had “overdosed” on ivermectin.

KFOR reporter Katelyn Ogle merged these separate observations into a single falsehood with the headline, “Patients overdosing on ivermectin backing up rural Oklahoma hospitals, ambulances.” Neither she nor the many national and international media outlets that picked up the story bothered to call any hospitals to confirm McElyea’s claims. (In fact, some hospitals were overwhelmed with COVID patients, but not with ivermectin overdoses.)

As with the chain-of-custody process designed to create an unimpeachable record of evidence gathered at a crime scene, journalists are obligated to account for the information they convey as fact in their stories. Who was the original source? Is that source reliable? Can that source’s statements be confirmed by other reliable sources and facts?

Basic tenets of journalistic practice are particularly important when a media outlet has already proven to be less than capable of following them. *Rolling Stone*, which infamously brought the world an invented college-rape story set at the University of Virginia in 2014, should never be considered a reputable source, as it proved yet again with its promotion of this story. Even the photograph the magazine used in its tweet publicizing its coverage was false, taken not outside a hospital this summer, but months earlier during a vaccination drive in the state.

And what of our Big Tech guardians against disinformation? Despite all the recent hand-wringing by companies such as Twitter and Facebook about the
spread of disinformation, Twitter did not mark Rachel Maddow's untruthful tweet (which remains uncorrected and was sent out to her 10.5 million followers) as misinformation.

Why not?

Because the ivermectin story fit the prevailing media narrative—a narrative that prioritizes fearmongering and tribalism over fact. The tone of the coverage was consistently and predictably polarizing: Midwestern rubes (probably Trump voters!), whom television hosts such as MSNBC's Joy Reid contemptuously called “ivermectin people,” take horse drugs and crowd hospitals. Mainstream-media personalities and journalists believe they are doing the right thing by calling out these yokels for their irresponsible behavior.

No matter that the narrative was pure confirmation bias. These days, confirmation bias functions as adrenaline for many in the mainstream media, and a single local news story can now provide mainstream outlets with just the right amount of salacious detail to justify their portrayal of their fellow Americans as halfwits.

The ivermectin narrative also fit neatly into a broader trend in COVID reporting: alarmism. The terrified tone of so much pandemic reporting, understandable early on when so little was known about the virus and when vaccines were not yet created, has become a permanent feature despite gains in treatment and the protection offered by mass vaccination. It is a form of path dependence whereby the default position for reporting about a new virus variant, for example, or about new treatments for COVID symptoms, begins from a point of panic rather than dispassionate fact-gathering.

This was evident with much of the reporting on the Delta variant. As COVID cases (overwhelmingly among the unvaccinated) began to rise this summer, albeit with thankfully lower death rates, news outlets shifted away from discussing the raw number of COVID hospitalizations and deaths (which would help readers put the recent wave in context) and instead talked about percentage increases that made the situation sound far more dire than it was—especially given the availability of free vaccines.

Story after story on cable news and in newspapers emphasized the dangers of the Delta variant and its supposed deadlier nature (which proved not to be true). In late July, the Washington Post ran a fearful story with the headline “The War Has Changed,” citing an internal CDC slide presentation about the Delta variant that emphasized breakthrough infections (which have proven not to be as widespread as stories suggest) and that claimed (false) that Delta was as contagious as chickenpox. By early September, the New York Times front page featured stories such as “Covid deaths surge across a weary America as a once-hopeful summer ends.”

There are a few notable exceptions to this trend. David Leonhardt at the New York Times has used his morning newsletter to debunk several COVID-related panics, most recently analyzing the available data regarding breakthrough cases of COVID in the vaccinated population. (His finding: The vaccinated have a 1-in-5,000 chance, at worst, of being hospitalized due to a breakthrough.)

Still, most published or aired stories about COVID are negative, alarmist, or both, even when the facts offer cause for optimism. Mixed messaging from public health officials compounds this problem, and together they have made vaccinated Americans feel as if it is unsafe for them to return to any sort of normal behavior.

In part, this is because the mainstream media are dominated by people who self-identify as being on the left of the political spectrum. Those same people tend to view themselves as the party of science over superstition, the people who value technocratic-elite directives over common people's commonsense instincts. From their perspective, they are the ones who “listen to the experts” and do the right thing by living under endless lockdowns and mask mandates, and whose endgame appears to be no return to normal until COVID cases reach zero (everyone else is a danger to society). In fact, the pandemic has proven their total inability to assess risks.

As the recent ivermectin kerfuffle demonstrates, it has also proven their insincerity. If you must lie to make the story work, you’re a propagandist, not a journalist. If your source’s statements seem too good to be true because they so perfectly capture your own ideological leanings, they probably are too good to be true—or your leanings have compromised your judgment. Journalists are supposed to approach events (and those in power) with skepticism, rigor, and the dogged pursuit of the facts on the ground regardless of whether those facts support the prevailing narrative. By actively promoting falsehoods about COVID and their fellow Americans, the media are like the boy who cried wolf. When and if they finally do uncover the truth, they will have made it impossible for us to believe them.
Back in July, CNN polling expert Harry Enten noticed something remarkable: President Biden’s job approval rating hadn’t budged during his first six months in office. This was good news for the White House. Unlike his predecessor, who never cracked 50 percent approval in a major poll conducted during his presidency, Biden was somewhat popular. His numbers had neither gone higher than 55 percent nor sunk below 51 percent. “It’s been the most stable for any president since the end of World War II,” Enten wrote.

It didn’t last. Enten’s column appeared just as Biden’s approval rating began a downhill slide. According to FiveThirtyEight’s polling average, on July 26, Biden’s net approval was 10 points. Less than two months later, on September 13, his net approval was underwater at -3 points. In other words: By the time Americans returned from summer vacation, they had realized that Joe Biden’s version of “normalcy” isn’t what they’d had in mind. Maybe the sea breeze awakened their senses.

Pundits tried to explain how the president’s August went terribly wrong. Was it COVID-19, the economy, or Afghanistan? Try all the above. Biden is in trouble not because of his failures in any one crisis, but because of his general incompetence. His positive approval rating wasn’t merely the victim of unfortunate events. It vanished as the public watched Biden respond to those events—and flail.

Like bankruptcy, the 13-point swing against Biden happened in two stages: first gradually, then suddenly. It started like this. Biden’s numbers declined in early August as deaths from the Delta variant of the coronavirus increased at a geometric rate. At the same time, voters soured on the economy. Consumer pessimism wasn’t simply a function of virus-related capacity restrictions, mask requirements, labor shortages, and supply-chain slowdowns. It was also a consequence of rising inflation.

“Spontaneous references to high prices for homes, vehicles, and household durables rose to its worst level since the all-time record in November 1974,” wrote Richard Curtin of the University of Michigan in a June consumer survey. “These unfavorable perceptions of market prices reduced overall buying attitudes for vehicles and homes to their lowest point since 1982.” For months, the White House and its allies dismissed inflation concerns as scaremongering. They said the rise in prices was only temporary. But “temporary” is now looking more like “indefinite.” And as consumer sentiment depreciated, so did Biden’s job approval.

Then came stage two of Biden’s collapse. His approval rating dropped dramatically in the catastrophic weeks after the Taliban stormed Kabul on August 15. Voters watched the botched American retreat with...
horror and disgust. They recoiled at the administration's reliance on terrorists for security around Kabul Airport during the evacuation. They reacted with sadness and fury when terrorists killed 13 U.S. servicemen and at least 60 Afghans. They couldn't believe that the president left behind hundreds of American citizens, thousands of U.S. legal permanent residents, and tens of thousands of Afghan partners in the 20-year war against Islamic militancy and al-Qaeda. According to FiveThirtyEight, Biden's disapproval rating overtook his approval rating on August 30—the same day that the last U.S. troops left Afghanistan. As of this writing, he hasn't recovered.

Will he? There is plenty of time before next year's midterm elections for the public to reassess its views of the Biden presidency and put him above 50 percent approval once more. The best-case scenario for the White House looks like the following: The Delta wave passes, caseloads fall, and Americans forget about Biden's farkakhet withdrawal from Afghanistan. The fading away of inflation would be nice, too. And if Democrats pull off the legislative logroll of the century and pass what the New York Times refers to euphemistically as a multi-trillion-dollar “social policy bill,” voters may reward the creators of new entitlements to paid leave, universal pre-K, and two years of community college.

Still, there's reason to doubt that Biden will regain his footing easily. There's reason to believe he won't defy historic precedent in 2022 by maintaining Democratic control of the House and Senate. That reason is Biden himself. Biden's tough talk and bold plans are cover for a chief executive who's just not very good at his job.

Nine months into office, the president has found it much easier to blame his predecessor and Republican governors for setbacks and mistakes than to change course and moderate his ambitions. The same man who said that “unity is our greatest strength” in a video marking the 20th anniversary of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks turns around and points fingers at his political adversaries, leads a party whose congressional leaders are hankering to transform America, and oversees a Justice Department that seems to open another investigation into GOP state governments on each day that ends in “y.”

This administration’s haplessness and buck-passing touch every issue. Biden dismantled the Trump administration’s border-security protocols and found himself unable to stanch record numbers of illegal crossings on the southern border. He delegated the border crisis to Vice President Kamala Harris, whose search for the “root causes” behind the surge in illegal immigration has taken her to Guatemala and Mexico and El Paso, but not anywhere close to a solution. Biden's proposal to curb the rise in violent crime is to make it harder for law-abiding citizens to possess firearms—a non sequitur masquerading as action. Biden claims that inflation will subside when Congress passes his several-trillion-dollar spending plans and tax hikes, and OPEC gives in to his pleas to boost energy production. It's hard to decide which is more shocking: His economic illiteracy or his willingness to return the United States to dependence on foreign oil.

Biden blamed Trump for an Afghan withdrawal deadline that he alone altered twice. Then he scolded the Afghan defense forces for melting away once he removed the close air support that the United States had provided for decades. Biden said that he withdrew U.S. forces from Afghanistan to protect the lives of U.S. soldiers. But more soldiers died in the August 26 attack at Kabul Airport than in any single day in Afghanistan since 2011. Biden said that despite our departure the United States will be able to combat al-Qaeda and ISIS in Afghanistan through an “over-the-horizon” counterterrorism capability. But that horizon is far, far away: America has no bases in Central Asia, and Afghanistan is a landlocked nation surrounded by our enemies. Biden said that he wants to focus on competition with China. He hasn't backed up his strident rhetoric with action.

Biden declared our “independence” from the coronavirus on July Fourth. Then he spent two and a half months dithering as the Delta wave spread havoc in the Southeast and Midwest. He went after governors who banned school mask mandates, but he didn't announce a major slate of proposals to increase vaccinations and mitigate Delta until September 9—by which time the summer wave had peaked. Mr. Unity has yet to “shut down the virus” as promised. But he has given Americans plenty of additional things to fight over and complain about. “There’s little doubt that the honeymoon is over for Biden,” election analyst Amy Walter of the Cook Political Report wrote recently. “The question now is if voters are still going to be happy in the marriage come next year.”

Happy? At this rate, they’ll be filing for divorce. &gt;
Commentary

Hannah Senesh at 100

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

The soul of man is the candle of God.
—PROVERBS 20:27

Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.
—HANNAH SENESH

In Yugoslavia in 1944, a paratrooper named Reuven Dafni escorted a compatriot of his, one Hannah Senesh, to the Hungarian border. They had both trained with the British in Mandate Palestine and then parachuted into Eastern Europe with the mission of joining the partisans and saving Jews. As Senesh prepared to enter Hungary, the land of her birth, she turned to Dafni and held out a piece of paper containing a poem she had just composed. “If I don’t come back, please bring this to the chaveirim in Sdot Yam,” she said, referring to the members of her kibbutz. Decades later, in a documentary interview, Dafni described his state of mind: “I was nervous like hell, and I was tense…. What the hell, what is she doing? In this situation she writes me some poems?”

After Senesh left, he angrily threw the piece of paper into the bushes and headed back to base. But halfway there, something within him made him stop and turn around. Even with German patrols everywhere, he searched for the poem: “It took me about an hour to find this piece of paper.” In the end, he discovered the small scrap that contained what would become one of the most famous poems in the Hebrew language.

Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.
Blessed is the flame that burns in the secret fastness of the heart.
Blessed is the heart with strength to stop its beating for honor’s sake.
Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.

Hannah Senesh, whose centenary birthday we mark this year, is a famous figure in the story of Israel and Zionism, her diary and poems read by Israelis for decades. Her life had eerie parallels to Theodor Herzl’s. Born and raised in assimilation, comfort, and culture, the daughter of an acclaimed playwright, Senesh had a sudden exposure to anti-Semitism that led her to embrace the Zionist movement and emigrate to Israel. Like Herzl, she joined literary gifts with Zionism, and

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like Herzl, her brief life inspired others far beyond its duration. The poignancy of her story lies in her connection to the Land of Israel, but also to the mother in Budapest that she had left. As she confided to a colleague, using a Hebrew pun, her two great loves were “ami and imi”—my people and my mother.

It was this familial link that drew her back to Hungary, and to her mission. Caught with a radio while crossing the border, Senesh refused, under terrible torture, to reveal the transmitter codes, and she continued to do so even when the Gestapo brought her mother to the very same prison to threaten the life of the woman she had come to save. Senesh was, by all accounts, a beacon of inspiration to other Jewish prisoners, sustaining them with tales of the Holy Land and famously drawing a Jewish star on the window of her cell. She was executed by firing squad soon before the Allies conquered Hungary.

Though her mission was a failure, nevertheless, as Martin Gilbert and Adam Kirsch have noted, she took part in the only Jewish military attempt to save Jews from the Holocaust—and thereby died for the Zionist principle that Jews should fight to defend Jews.

What is the meaning of “Blessed Is the Match,” of the few lines salvaged in the forests of Yugoslavia? The Bible in Proverbs tells us that ner hashem nishmat Adam; the soul of man is a candle, or lamp, of God. It is a powerful and enduring image: The human soul is akin to a candle lit by the Creator, and even a small flame contains an extraordinary amount of power. The verse describes the luminous courage of the human spirit, bringing to mind how Churchill described Harry Hopkins, a sickly and infirm man who did so much to bring America to support Britain during this terrible time. Hopkins, he said, was “a soul that flamed out of a frail and failing body. He was a crumbling lighthouse from which there shone the beams that led great fleets to harbor.”

This is the biblical metaphor: the human being as candle. But Senesh gives us a more modern image, seizing on an invention that did not exist in the biblical era: the match. Lamps and candles are infused with fuel so that their flames sustain themselves, but a match brings forth a fiery force from within that is gone within seconds. Yet if the match successfully kindles another flame, even as it is consumed it still lives on, and its apparently transient life endowed with endurance, continuity. In Senesh’s words, the match is nisraf, burnt up, consumed, but it can ignite others in its few moments in existence. And so we can pronounce ashrei hagafrur, fortunate is the match.

Did Senesh write these words because she had a sense of her coming death? We cannot know, but she certainly knew how dangerous her mission was, and this poem eerily captures her own life, one all too short but that nonetheless kindled and inspired others throughout Israel and the Jewish world. This past July, on the week of Senesh’s birthday, more than 100 Israeli paratroopers, along with members of European militaries, re-created Senesh’s jump. Their commander explained that they sought to perpetuate her memory in the land of her birth and “strengthen the sense of mission and the memory of heroism.”

Was Senesh, who had asked for a Hebrew Bible while in prison, inspired by the verse in Proverbs that tells us the soul of man is the candle of God? Again, we do not know, but Senesh had certainly thought about her soul. Soon after her 15th birthday, she reflected in her diary: “I would rather be an unusual person than just average. When I think of an above-average man I don’t necessarily think of a famous man, but of a great soul ... a great human being. And I would like to be a great soul. If God will permit.”

At this point, Senesh had not even embraced Zionism, and certainly could never have conceived of the horror that would descend on her home in Hungary. But she did become a great soul, not a candle but a match. It is overwhelming to think of a young woman who suffered in prison and was murdered for trying to save Jews being remembered on the very same soil by so many, and by soldiers of a Jewish state of which she had dreamed but did not live to see.

In the hours before Yom Kippur, Jews light memorial candles for those who have passed away, a ritual inspired by the biblical proverb that the soul of man is the candle of God. I do not know whether this year, in some homes in Israel, a candle was lit for Hannah Senesh; but the truth is that perhaps in this case a candle is unnecessary. I will wager that there are Jews around the world who, whenever candles are kindled on Shabbat eve, on Hanukkah, or before Yom Kippur, see a match struck right before the candle is lit and think of Hannah. I know I do.

Hannah Senesh
IN MAY 2014, I embedded with Charley Company of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines to write about their “retrograde” from Afghanistan’s Sangin Valley—known to coalition forces as “Sangingrad” for the fierceness of the battles they had waged there against the Taliban. On our last night at FOB Nolay—a dusty and desolate forward operating base that had neither electricity nor running water—I asked one hard-bitten major why the military brass insisted on using the term “retrograde,” which seemed more appropriate to astrology than it did to combat.

“I guess they didn’t want to call it a retreat,” was his mordant reply.

Retrograde or retreat, it was an orderly business. Shortly before dusk, the Marines took out the

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trash, bid farewell to the nervous Afghan soldiers taking over the base, and drove off in their MRAPs and mine rollers. It’s a moment I’ve thought about often this summer while watching America’s shambolic final act in Afghanistan. It was obvious in 2014 that, barring unexpected leadership in Washington, we were on our way out and that the result would be a strategic debacle for the United States and a humanitarian catastrophe for Afghanistan.

Yet that knowledge did little to prepare me for the emotional impact of our exit, when the humiliation of our surrender to the Taliban was compounded by the shame of abandoning our Afghan friends to a terrible fate. America wasn’t merely a country that would rather lose a war outright than maintain a secure garrison at Bagram Air Base to provide Afghans with the air power, surveillance, maintenance, and logistics they needed to avert collapse. We were also a country that couldn’t quite manage to fast-track the visas of a few thousand military interpreters and others who had helped us, at grave risk to themselves, when we needed them most.

Our incompetence matched our fecklessness, and our fecklessness matched our untrustworthiness. To say this is how great powers fall would be an insult to the great powers of the past, which fell under greater strain, for weightier reasons.

What comes next? That is the subject of this essay. But first a word on what came before.

Nine years ago, I published an essay in Commentary called “The Coming Global Disorder.” Barack Obama was running for reelection on the promise of ending “more than a decade of war” in order to “focus on nation-building here at home.” Much of the foreign-policy establishment was echoing the theme. American troops were out of Iraq; the surge in Afghanistan was winding down, Osama bin Laden was dead, and—as Obama snidely told Mitt Romney when his 2012 Republican challenger named Russia as our principal geopolitical foe—“the 1980s are now calling to ask for their foreign policy back.”

That new consensus had obvious political appeal, and it helped win Obama a second term. But it was also dangerous, for three principal reasons.

The first danger was strategic. “You may not be interested in war,” goes a line usually attributed to Leon Trotsky, “but war is interested in you.” As Obama was all but declaring victory in the war on terror, Islamist terrorism was resurgent, largely on account of the vacuum he had left in Iraq.* As Obama was resisting calls to stop the Assad regime’s depredations, Syrians were fleeing their country by the millions, creating a refugee crisis that would ultimately overwhelm Europe in 2015. As Obama was “resetting” relations with Russia, Vladimir Putin was plotting his next adventure to expand Russian frontiers and undermine Western democracies. As Obama was winding down NATO’s mission in Afghanistan, the Taliban understood, as one refrain went, that “Americans had the watches, but they had the time.” As Obama was trying to engage Tehran in nuclear diplomacy, Iran was entrenching its influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen. As Obama was slashing defense spending, China was bidding for na-

* Apologists of the Obama administration sometimes claim that maintaining a military presence in Iraq was never a possibility, thanks to the terms of the Status of Forces Agreement that the Bush administration had reached with the Iraqi government in 2008. This is false. As Leon Panetta, Obama’s CIA director and later secretary of defense, recalled in his memoir, the White House was “so eager to rid itself of Iraq that it was willing to withdraw rather than lock in arrangements that would preserve our influence and interests.”
val dominance in the western Pacific while building artificial islands in the South China Sea to claim the waters as its own.

In short, what Obama called “retrenchment”—another euphemism for retreat—was, to America’s adversaries, an opportunity. They were not slow to seize it. Within little more than a year of Obama’s second inauguration, ISIS controlled a caliphate the size of Great Britain, Bashar al-Assad had gassed his own people without consequence to himself, and Putin had seized Crimea and ignited a deadly war in eastern Ukraine.

The second danger was conceptual. Obama’s mantra of “nation-building here at home” had as its premise the notion that an assertive foreign policy was something America did at the expense of domestic policy, rather than as an essential complement to it.

This was a stark reversal of more than six decades of American policy. It was also a reversal built on misleading data and vacuous clichés. The policy, beginning with the 1947 Truman Doctrine, was based on the understanding that American prosperity and safety rested heavily on the prosperity and safety of allies from Seoul to Berlin. We could not let friendly countries (even those that weren’t democracies) fend for themselves against totalitarian enemies and pretend it had nothing to do with us. The misleading data typically came in the form of eye-popping figures about the lifetime costs of the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan, which ignored the fact that U.S. defense expenditures have been a steadily shrinking fraction of gross domestic product (from 5.6 percent in 1990 to 3.4 percent in 2019) while social expenditures have been a steadily growing one (from 13.2 percent to 18.7 percent over the same time period). And the vacuous clichés came in phrases such as “forever wars,” which, as former British prime minister Tony Blair pointed out in August, was “an imbecilic political slogan” based on the false notion that “our engagement in 2021 was remotely comparable to our commitment 20 or even 10 years ago.”

The final danger was moral.

The United States did not embark on the so-called War on Terror as a spurious foreign-policy adventure. Nor did it do so on a partisan basis. On 9/11 we suffered the most devastating single-day violent loss of life on American soil since the battle of Antietam. There was no guarantee that we wouldn’t suffer more—or worse. We were attacked by a global terrorist network that was an inspiration to hundreds of thousands if not millions of radicalized Muslims worldwide. It was a network harbored by a barbaric regime that shared its ideology and refused to surrender its leaders.

Once we were in Afghanistan, a war both Obama and Biden claimed was a must-win for the United States when they ran for office in 2008, the only way out was through. We made many mistakes during the war. But we did stand up a government that, for all of its ineptitude and corruption, did not threaten other states, did not terrorize its own people, and did not fly the banners of jihad. It also did not have to collapse—if only it could have been sustained by basic, but persistent, U.S. support.

Like shrapnel, the moral damage flew in many directions. We sent hundreds of thousands of men and women to war, and thousands to their grave, in the name of national security and democratic idealism—only to throw away their victories for transparently political reasons. We validated the belief, underscored by bin Laden in one of his pre-9/11 fatwas, that Americans inevitably cut and run from fights against determined foes. We betrayed local allies after they had taken immense risks to stand with us, sending the fatal signal to future would-be allies that Uncle Sam is a fickle and dangerous partner. And we made Americans cynical about the United States as a beacon of steadfastness and hope in the face of the enemies of freedom.

This was the trajectory that Obama set America on when he came to the White House. It is one Donald Trump largely adopted, albeit with less consistency and greater truculence, in the guise of “America First.” And it culminated with Biden’s unnecessary surrender on August 31, perversely timed to coincide with the 20th anniversary of al-Qaeda’s greatest victory.

There are several counterarguments to my critique, some smarter than others.

Among the less smart: that we should never have gone into Afghanistan in the first place. That the invasion of Iraq made us “take our eye off the ball” in Afghanistan. That we should have withdrawn after Osama bin Laden was killed. That the swift collapse of the Afghan army only proved that we had been building on sand from day one.

Not going into Afghanistan after 9/11 was never a serious option—not politically (the 2001 vote to authorize military force was 420–1 in the House and 98–0 in the Senate), and not militarily, since the only quick way to have killed or apprehended bin Laden was to dislodge the regime that was giving al-Qaeda sanctuary. *

* In the event, bin Laden was killed in Pakistan in an operation that could only have been mounted from Afghanistan. Had the U.S. withdrawn its forces in 2009, as many opponents of the war urged at the time, the U.S. would have been deprived even of this consoling victory.
The key problem with our strategy in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban was neither insufficient troop levels nor inadequate nation-building efforts. Rather, it was the sanctuary that Pakistan gave to the Taliban leadership after we had ousted them. That problem could only have been solved with a massive expansion of the war into the territory of that nuclear-armed Islamic nation—a strategically risky proposition that would have garnered a hysterical reaction from the same people who accused the Bush administration of shortchanging the Afghan war effort. The idea that we should have withdrawn after bin Laden's death ignores the fact that this is essentially what we did: Before leaving office, Obama cut U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan by over 90 percent of their surge-level highs. That withdrawal only hastened the sharp deterioration of conditions in Afghanistan, which later became the explanation for why we should never have been there in the first place.

As for the suggestion that the failure of the Afghan army to hold off the Taliban proves the wisdom of Biden's decision to withdraw, one might equally ask how long Latvia, Norway, or Poland would last against a long-running campaign of Russian subversion and aggression if they were not defended by U.S. security guarantees and boots on the ground. Pax Americana, like little Hans Brinker, has always been a matter of the United States keeping its finger in the hole in the dike.

In the end, the war in Afghanistan, like the war in Iraq, was lost not because it was “unwinnable.” We lost it because a president made a deliberate choice to guarantee our own defeat.

The more sophisticated counterargument runs as follows: Our involvement in the Middle East is a game that isn’t worth the candle. According to this line of thinking, we have made an investment of blood and treasure that cannot justify whatever conceivable strategic, diplomatic, or economic returns it might yield. Thanks to fracking, we no longer depend on Middle Eastern oil the way we once did (and, anyway, oil-producing states, hostile or friendly, have no choice but to pump and sell it to the global market). Terrorism is a worldwide, not Middle Eastern, problem: To bomb jihadists in Mosul merely radicalizes their cousins in Marseilles. The Muslim world appears to be incapable of democratic reform: Nearly every time a free and fair election is held, whether in Egypt, Gaza, or Turkey, Islamist parties with authoritarian tendencies win. So forget about nation-building. If Beijing's panjandra want this mess (and there are already reports that the Chinese might want to lease Bagram Air Base), they are welcome to it.

This isn’t to say, the counterargument continues, that the U.S. can or should retreat from its global role. But we urgently need to realign resources to priorities, even if it means cutting our losses in ways that may feel humiliating now but that we’ll soon get over. Our top priorities lie in shoring up long-standing alliances with competent partners in Asia and Europe, so that we may jointly confront mounting threats from China and Russia. Helping Australia build nuclear submarines is a good example of the kind of steps we can take (even if those submarines won’t be operational for at least another decade).

The template here is our recovery from defeat in Vietnam, when we refocused our efforts on core rather than peripheral geopolitical challenges; achieved substantial diplomatic victories at Helsinki, Camp David, and Geneva; and discovered fresh sources of national power in places such as Silicon Valley and Wall Street, which came from neither victory nor defeat on distant battlefields.

This counterargument gets one central point right—not that anyone seriously disputes it anymore. We are again living in a world of great-power rivalry. China will be our most formidable geopolitical adversary for decades to come by virtue of its size, wealth, rapid arms buildup, reversion to Maoist-style rule, and increasingly brazen aggression. Russia also poses unique dangers owing to its revanchist ambitions, its habits of subversion, its grip on Europe's energy markets, and its immense nuclear arsenal. And despite their latent rivalry, Beijing and Moscow have a powerful common interest in undermining Pax Americana—the complex network of military alliances, trade agreements, common rules, and shared values among the U.S. and our allies, which have undergirded the free world since the end of World War II.

Yet the idea that we can conveniently pivot from the Middle East to focus on more important areas is a conceit wrapped in a delusion. Irrespective of energy, the region engages five vital Western interests.

- **Terrorism.** The experience of the past several decades teaches us that, while domestic terrorism can be handled as a law-enforcement problem, the most dangerous breeding grounds of terror are sovereign states or quasi-autonomous areas that become magnets, training grounds, protectors, and ultimately exporters of jihad. That was the lesson of Afghanistan before 9/11 and of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria after 2013.
• **Proliferation.** The gravest problem with an Iranian bomb is not that the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism would possess the most lethal means of carrying out its designs. It’s that an Iranian bomb would swiftly lead to a Saudi bomb, a Saudi bomb to a Turkish bomb, and so on. Nuclear deterrence—difficult to conduct in the Cold War when the U.S. and the Soviet Union possessed largely symmetrical capabilities—becomes all but impossible when three or four nuclear states, in the world’s most combustible region, are each at daggers drawn with the others.

• **Catastrophic state failure.** The world can ill afford another state collapse in the broader Middle East similar to what we’ve already witnessed in Yemen, Syria, Libya, and now Lebanon. Nor can it afford a radical Islamist government capturing another major capital, as nearly happened in Egypt after the fall of the Mubarak regime.

• **Refugees.** The West would be crippled by a refugee crisis on a par with the one that swamped Europe in 2015. Among other effects, it would accelerate the populist backlash that has strengthened quasi-fascist parties like France’s National Front and Germany’s Alternative for Germany, while creating opportunities for Russia to make further inroads at the (increasingly powerful) fringes of European politics.

• **Israel.** Assuring the safety and security of the Jewish state is not merely a moral and historic responsibility for the Western world. It is also deeply in the interest of the United States that its principal Middle Eastern ally remain capable of taking decisive action—as it did against Saddam Hussein’s nuclear program in 1981 and Bashar al-Assad’s in 2007—when Washington lacked the stomach to curb regional threats.

The fall of Kabul has now gravely jeopardized every one of these interests.

Afghanistan will likely again become a terrorist sanctuary, though perhaps with less overt Taliban support. Iran will look at the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan (as well as our pending withdrawal from Iraq) as further evidence that we will do next to nothing serious to limit its ambitions, regional or nuclear. Pakistan, which heedlessly supported and cheered the Afghan Taliban, will now be more vulnerable to its own resurgent Taliban insurgency. A fresh refugee crisis stemming from conflict and repression in Afghanistan seems to be merely a matter of time. And Israel’s security, in an era of American retreat, will depend more than ever on its own limited resources.

The larger point is this: To believe that the self-inflicted wound the U.S. just suffered in Afghanistan has no bearing on our power, security, and reputation in the world is a fantasy.

As Kabul fell to the Taliban, China’s *Global Times*, the English-language sister publication of the *People’s Daily*, wasted no time in drawing some obvious, if self-interested, conclusions. “The U.S. strategy of withdrawing from Afghanistan, contracting its military presence in the Middle East and enhancing geopolitical rivalry with China in Southeast Asia will soon prove useless,” it boasted in an editorial.

The Taiwan authorities have tied themselves tightly to the U.S., but the U.S. will not offer unlimited support to the island at the cost of U.S. own interests.... When faced with the Chinese mainland’s determination for a military showdown, the U.S. is destined to retreat.... China and Russia should unite different forces to humiliate the U.S. over the Lithuania issue and the Taiwan question, generating a new, universally comprehensible “Afghan effect” in different forms. Washington’s arms are way too long, so Beijing and Moscow should cut them short in places where Washington shows its arrogance and parades its abilities.

The *Global Times* is a mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, so bluster, propaganda, and bad prose go with its territory. Nonetheless, what the editorial calls the “ Universally comprehensible ‘Afghan effect’” is true, in two important senses.

First, our Afghan fiasco is forcing traditional American allies to reassess the wisdom of their reliance on Washington.

This is not just a matter of our tattered credibility (more about which below). It’s also one of capability and competence. It’s difficult to think of any aspect of the Afghan withdrawal, beginning with Biden’s judgment, predictions, and execution, that might inspire
a geopolitical opponent to respect, much less fear, the American president as a canny global statesman.

As for capability, though the U.S. military remains by many metrics the most powerful in the world, it is a shadow of what it was when it last was confronted with great-power competition. In 1990, at the end of the Cold War, the Air Force had some 4,000 fighters in its hangars. The number is closer to 2,000 today. Our bomber force has lost nearly two-thirds of its fleet, and now mostly relies on B-52s built in the 1960s. The number of ships in the Navy has similarly declined by half despite concerted recent efforts to increase their numbers. China’s navy is now larger ship for ship, though not yet in capability or tonnage.

Beijing may still be the lesser power compared with the U.S., globally speaking. But in the areas where we are most likely to clash, it has all of the advantages of proximity, numbers, and initiative. The People’s Liberation Army “has transformed its force to specifically offset U.S. operational advantages in the Pacific theater,” noted Lee Hsi-min, former chief of staff of the Taiwanese military, in July. “To this end, the Chinese military has developed anti-ship ballistic missiles, attack submarines and an array of air and naval platforms for conducting saturation attacks to overwhelm enemies, all supported by space-based systems that make it more integrated and lethal.”

Second, the fiasco is an invitation to our adversaries to view the remainder of the Biden administration as neither a nuisance nor a threat, but rather as a possibly unique three-year window of strategic opportunity.

In March, Admiral Philip Davidson, head of the Indo-Pacific Command, predicted that China would try to seize Taiwan within six years. “We are accumulating risk,” he said delicately, “that may embolden China to unilaterally change the status quo before our forces may be able to deliver an effective response.” But why should China still wait six years? After Afghanistan, the U.S. is thinking as never before about how better to defend Taiwan, a process that would take several years to complete. The opportunity, from Beijing’s standpoint, is sooner rather than later.

As for Russia, opinions vary as to where Putin will strike next. It might be Ukraine, along whose border it again massed troops earlier this year; or Belarus, already a client state, where persistent unrest against a despised dictator risks inspiring Putin’s own domestic opponents; or Montenegro, where in 2016 Russian agents very nearly carried off a coup shortly before the country joined NATO; or, as I think, one of the Baltic states (Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia), in order to expose the hollowness of American military guarantees while also breaking NATO’s spine.

Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia’s former president, has proposed a more intriguing possibility: Finland or Sweden. “I do not expect Russian tanks to roll into Helsinki or Stockholm, but it would be relatively simple for Moscow to execute a land grab in a remote Arctic enclave or a small island,” he speculated in 2019. “By attacking a non-NATO country, Putin does not risk a proportional response in accordance with Article 5. But by targeting a European country, he can expect to reap the rewards of public approval at home.”

Implausible? Outlandish? Perhaps. But how many of the same people who now think the Afghan retreat won’t matter all that much ever thought Putin would seize Crimea and start a war in eastern Ukraine at a cost of thousands of lives and with utter contempt for the West—until he did exactly that?

There are other conceivable scenarios. Ultimately, however, the specific targets of aggression don’t really matter. For Russia as well China, the central goal of their next foreign adventure is not to add another parcel to their already vast territories, while incurring the predictable price in casualties, sanctions, trade penalties, or perhaps a cancelled invitation to a diplomatic summit.

The real goal is to dislodge America, firmly and for good, as the dominant power in global affairs. To do so would also dislodge everything that dominance has come to represent: the power of the liberal-democratic-capitalist model; the concern for human rights and political dissidents; the willingness to use tools of economic and military power on behalf of moral objectives. A world in which the United States becomes a “normal” country—perhaps still faithful to its ideals but not all that interested in exporting them; transactional and amoral in its foreign policies; a big nation that can defend its own borders but not a superpower that can impose its will—is a world in which people like Putin, Xi Jinping, Ali Khamenei, and their ilk can truly thrive.

That’s a prize worth seizing while it’s there to be had. And there’s no better way of doing it than by further humbling an already humiliated America. Why give Biden and his administration the luxury to lick their wounds, gather their wits, and recover their strength? In the playbook of any bully or dictator, there’s never a better time to kick a man than when he is down.

**Things Might Be** different, of course, if the West’s unity of purpose under U.S. leadership could still be taken for granted. Here again, there’s serious room for doubt.

Though Americans are apt to forget,
more than 1,000 troops from allied countries died fighting in Afghanistan. That includes 456 British troops—a toll that, proportionate to the UK’s population, is nearly equal to the scale of American sacrifice. They died because, after 9/11, NATO invoked Article 5 of its charter—that an attack on one NATO member is an attack on all—to join the U.S. in its fight against the Taliban.

In the end, it was the United States that left them scrambling to get their soldiers, diplomats, aid workers and citizens out of the country before Biden’s arbitrary August 31 deadline for defeat.

Tom Tugendhat, chairman of the House of Commons’ Foreign Affairs Committee and a decorated veteran of the Afghan war, called Joe Biden’s behavior “shameful” in a moving speech to Parliament. Ben Wallace, the UK defense minister, went further, saying, “A superpower that is also not prepared to stick at something isn’t probably a superpower... It is certainly not a global force, it’s just a big power.”

In Germany, Armin Laschet, leader of Germany’s Christian Democratic Union Party and (as of this writing) potentially Angela Merkel’s successor as chancellor, described the U.S. withdrawal as “the biggest debacle that NATO has suffered since its founding, and we’re standing before an epochal change.” In Brussels, Josep Borrell Fontelles, foreign-affairs chief for the European Union, called the withdrawal “a catastrophe for the Afghan people, for Western values and credibility, and for the developing of international relations.”

There have been previous crises in transatlantic relations, from the 1956 Suez debacle to the 2003 fight over the Iraq war. This one is fundamentally different. It calls into question not simply Washington’s judgment but its will.

If the U.S. will not maintain a garrison in Afghanistan to avert the victory of a jihadist enemy that, to this day, maintains ties with al-Qaeda, where else will America’s commitments be found wanting? Just as a past generation of Europeans didn’t particularly want to “die for Danzig,” as the notorious pre–World War II pacifist slogan had it, why should a current generation of Americans want to die for Tallinn or Podgorica, capitals of two small NATO member states that few Americans could even name or find on a map?

One answer offered by President Biden is that, unlike with Afghanistan, the U.S. has “sacred commitments” to its NATO allies in the form of signed treaties. It’s an answer that illustrates why French president Emmanuel Macron has complained publicly about the “brain death” of NATO. Nations don’t go to war merely because they have treaty obligations: They fight for the interests and values that treaties are supposed to for-

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terly improbable event of foreign attack. Much the same goes for our oldest alliances in Asia, such as with Australia and Japan. But there is almost no plausible circumstance in which this president, to say nothing of his predecessor, would go to war for smaller NATO members that are much likelier targets for attack. In trying to distinguish between “core” U.S. interests and “peripheral” ones, as advocates of the withdrawal from Afghanistan do, they have merely shrunk the core and redefined what constitutes the periphery.

What’s true of the U.S. in relation to the smaller NATO states is doubly so when it comes to the attitude of Europe’s strongest states toward their more vulnerable neighbors.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of Gazprom’s Nord Stream 2, an undersea pipeline running directly from Russia to the German port of Greifswald on the Baltic coast. The pipeline—built by a consortium whose chairman is none other than former German Chancellor and Putin stooge Gerhard Schroeder—had been the target of U.S. sanctions and pan-European opposition because it bypasses Ukraine and Poland as transit corridors while making Germany even more heavily dependent on Russian gas. The result, as Matthew Thomas at the Baltic Security Foundation points out, is that it allows “Russia to directly coerce favorable outcomes in Western Europe, while also allowing energy blackmail in the east to go unchecked by now unaffected western countries.” Incredibly, the Biden administration, which came to office with tough talk on Russia, lifted the most punitive sanctions, allowing the project to be completed this month.

The purpose of NATO, Hastings Ismay, its first secretary general, once said, was to keep the Americans in, the Russians out, and the Germans down. Now it’s the Germans who are keeping the Americans out, letting the Russians in, and pushing their vulnerable eastern neighbors down.

There is, of course, much more to transatlantic relations than Nord Stream or similar controversies, such as the one over China’s Huawei telecom bids. But it’s emblematic of a broader decay. The historic, cultural, linguistic, and emotional ties that once bonded Americans to Europe have been waning for decades. So, too are the economic ties: Europe’s overall share of the world economy has shrunk from 36 percent in 1960, to 22 percent in 2020, to a predicted 10 percent by the end of the century. After the fall of Kabul, Europeans will never be able to trust the strength of American security guarantees. Americans, for their part, have grown disenchanted by European freeloaders on those guarantees, typified by Germany’s shrunk military budgets. This is a marital separation in the making, initiated by mutual consent.

Inertia is a powerful force in international affairs, and decay can go on for years. For now, NATO holds together because few American leaders (other than Trump) are willing to call the alliance into doubt, and because few European leaders (including Macron) are willing to put their money where their mouths are by spending sufficiently on their militaries to end their dependence on American arms. But reticence on one side and parsimony on the other will do nothing to reverse the slide. And the prospect of an outside shock to the alliance looms larger than it has in decades.

S THERE a way back?

In 2009, as the Obama administration was laying the groundwork for America’s previous retrenchment, Charles Krauthammer delivered a memorable speech to the Manhattan Institute on the subject of national decline. “The question of whether America is in decline cannot be answered yes or no,” Krauthammer said.

There is no yes-or-no. Both answers are wrong, because the assumption that somehow there exists some predetermined inevitable trajectory, the result of uncontrollable external forces, is wrong. Nothing is inevitable. Nothing is written. For America today, decline is not a condition. Decline is a choice.

For many years I shared Krauthammer’s sense that America could still choose to avoid decline. Today I am less sanguine, for several reasons. Though Republicans are now in strenuous denial about their role in the Afghan debacle, they still bear a heavy burden of blame for what happened. Trump Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s signature is on the February 2020 agreement with the Taliban dictating our withdrawal; there’s a picture of him standing next to Taliban co-founder Abdul Ghani Baradar. So much for not negotiating with terrorists. Trump very nearly had the Taliban over for a photo-op peace agreement at Camp David.

Among the most destructive legacies of the Trump presidency is that, at the level of ideology if not of practice, he aligned the GOP with the same basic Retreat Doctrine that had animated Obama’s presidency and now lives on in Biden’s.“Regrets, conservatives may have a few. But thanks to Trump, the new bipartisan foreign-policy consensus is no longer that we should pay
any price and bear any burden to defend freedom in the world. It's that America should generally mind its own business, spend more of its resources on itself, and let other parts of the world fend and fight for themselves. From the point of view of Xi or Putin, this is as close as it gets to an ideal American view of itself.

Second, the American social compact is being progressively rewritten—or, rather, rewritten by progressives—in a way that, over time, will make it difficult for the U.S. to maintain defense expenditures and foreign commitments adequate to a true superpower. In the 12 years since Krauthammer gave his speech, the U.S. has added a vast new permanent entitlement in the form of Obamacare; done nothing to redirect the trajectory toward insolvency that Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid are currently on; added trillions in debt to the federal fisc; funded economic growth in the form of cheap money that leads to asset price inflation; and may yet create a broad new set of social entitlements that will only become costlier over time. At some point, this level of spending may also call into question the dollar's status as the world's reserve currency—even now, our most valuable strategic asset against our adversaries.

One always has to be careful in making economic predictions, and the U.S. economy has often shown the capacity to surprise on the upside. But if the U.S. were to be hit by another financial crisis or an extended period of stagflation, how much appetite would there be for risky military confrontations at the new peripheries of Pax Americana?

Third, the idea of the United States as the world's exceptional and indispensable nation is fading from the American conscience. Bold attempts at historical revisionism such as the 1619 Project seek to recast the American story as one of original, relentless, and ongoing racial supremacy, rather than as a country in which the forces of religious, political, civic, and personal liberty unfurled their banners to defeat the bigots.

Older, more historically literate Americans may treat this new narrative with the skepticism it richly deserves. But a younger generation already saturated with the new racialist ideology is likely to be more credulous. A country that conceives of itself as foundationally wicked and irredeemably sinful is going to have neither the moral self-confidence nor the historical perspective that the free world needs in a champion.

Finally, while Otto von Bismarck might have been on to something when he wisecracked that “there is providence that protects idiots, drunkards, children, and the United States of America,” even the luckiest countries can, eventually, do themselves in. The forces unleashed by “the Afghan effect” will, if left unchecked, develop an unbreakable and accelerating momentum of their own. Retreat needn’t always lead to surrender; but, as Napoleon is reputed to have said, “the logical outcome of retreat is surrender.”

As fate would have it, the fall of Kabul coincided almost to the day with the 80th anniversary of the issuance of the Atlantic Charter on August 14, 1941, following Franklin Roosevelt’s historic meeting with Winston Churchill in Newfoundland’s Placentia Bay. That charter laid the basis not only for the military alliance that defeated the Axis Powers. It also created an alliance of principle, power, courage, and ideals that have sustained the free world against successive enemies from Moscow to Beijing to Raqqa to Tehran.

There is still time to reclaim and revive that inheritance. But as we learned in Kabul this summer, there is often far less time than we expect. It’s a bitter but necessary lesson that we cannot afford to be taught twice.
GIVING UP ON THE GOOD-ENOUGH WAR

WHY WE CHOSE TO LOSE IN AFGHANISTAN

BY ELI LAKE

AMERICA’S LONGEST WAR, we are being told, should be remembered for its pain and its folly: the suicides of veterans, the sham of Afghanistan’s military, the greed of the contractors, the immolated wedding parties, the pederast warlords. The valor to be celebrated is now reserved for the airlift that commenced after the fall of a Potemkin regime, not the 20-year mission that allowed that government to survive until it didn’t. As the New York Times news alert to mark the exit of the last soldier put it: “The U.S. Occupation Ends.”

This is President Joe Biden’s narrative, a narrative in which America is no different from the past empires whose headstones dot the landscape of Afghanistan. The narrative claims they too tried to tame an untamable country, and we followed foolishly in their footsteps. As Biden quipped to a reporter on July 8, “it’s up to the people of Afghanistan to decide the government they want, not us to impose the government on them.”

It is an appealing pose for Democrats looking for a reason to support their president’s betrayal. It also suits the purposes of the America-Firsters who

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dance to the beat of Donald Trump’s drum. Why are we building schools for girls half a world away when our own schools are failing? they ask. Besides, the Afghans never wanted democracy. If they did, their army would have fought for it, and their government wouldn’t have collapsed.

How does this theory account for Afghans such as Hamed Kohistani? He is a doctor at a Kabul hospital who, in 2018, waited for five hours to vote in his country’s parliamentary elections. He told the New York Times, “The problem is not waiting, the problem is security. The longer you wait in line, the more the risk is.” That risk was the Taliban. Throughout the seven national Afghan elections since 2004, the Taliban waged a vicious war on voting itself. They warned Afghans on social media and official communiqués not to show up on Election Day. They targeted poll workers and police chiefs. They sent volunteers and conscripts with suicide vests and car bombs to polling stations. And in the territories the Taliban controlled or contested, they outlawed voting entirely.

Yet millions of Afghans showed up to cast their ballots anyway. This fact is all the more remarkable considering how corrupt those elections were. The Taliban’s campaign of terror made it nearly impossible for outside monitors to observe vote counts. A national voter registry was riddled with errors and easily manipulated. Every major Afghan election featured accusations and counter accusations of fraud. Thus, the act of voting itself must be seen as a protest against its potential negation.

Successive elections were not the only or even the most important achievement of American and Western arms in Afghanistan. The war was waged in Afghanistan to prevent the next 9/11, and in this respect it succeeded. But the resilience and courage of Afghan voters put the lie to the glib slander that millions of Afghans did not want democracy.

Think of the women in the larger cities such as Kabul and Kandahar. When the Taliban ruled Afghanistan before their ouster in late 2001, girls were banned from attending school. As of 2020, 3.5 million out of 9 million students were girls. Between 2005 and 2017, the female literacy rate nearly doubled from 20 percent to 39 percent. As of 2020, there were 70,000 women teachers.

The gains were not limited to women. As the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, or SIGAR, said in a recent report, “the lives of millions of Afghans have been improved by U.S. government interventions.” In 2018, the SIGAR noted that life expectancy had jumped from 56 to 65. Between 2001 and 2019, the mortality rate for children under five decreased from more than 50 percent to 28 percent. And Afghanistan’s overall Gross Domestic Product tripled between 2002 and 2019.

These successes are most apparent in Kabul. Under the Taliban, it was a joyless, culturally barren city. After the American and NATO intervention, Kabul hosted film festivals, art exhibits, and new universities.

In 2014, a group of young female orphans formed the Zohra Orchestra, named for the Persian goddess of music. In August, as the Taliban swept to power, the orchestra’s 24-year-old conductor, Negin Khpalwak, prepared for the worst. According to a heartbreaking Reuters dispatch, Khpalwak “grabbed a robe to cover her bare arms and hid away a small set of decorative drums. Then she gathered up photographs and press clippings of her famed musical performances, put them in a pile and burnt them.”

It’s a mistake to say America fought a 20-year war only for Negin Khpalwak’s orchestra or female literacy or Kabul film festivals. But it’s also true that the war to keep the Taliban in their caves created the space for civil society to grow, particularly in the big cities.

Initially, counterterrorism and nation-building were meant to be complementary. As former National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley told SIGAR in a report released this year, “The goal was to help Afghanistan build a government, provide a prosperous life for the Afghan people, and thus create a resiliency against al-Qaeda’s return.” In other words, nation-building was America’s exit strategy.

This may sound ludicrous in 2021. But in the
early 2000s, it was conventional wisdom. As George W. Bush put it in his second inaugural address: “The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.” This is one reason why Biden’s and Donald Trump’s joint theory of Afghanistan—that this “graveyard of empires” proves the burial ground for the American empire—is wrong. When Soviet special operators invaded Afghanistan in 1979, they installed a puppet. America had the vision and hubris to attempt to make Afghanistan freer. At least that was the stated goal of the Bush administration—and, ironically, the Obama administration in its first term.

But there was a catch. Or a glitch. Or an internal policy catastrophe. Take your pick. It’s important to remember that the first forces to land in Afghanistan after 9/11 were not soldiers in the U.S. Army, but CIA officers. The agency had real experience in Afghanistan. It had worked in the 1980s through Pakistan’s military intelligence service to fund and equip the Mujahideen warriors who drove the Soviets out of the country. The CIA learned during that proxy war that Afghanistan was more a patchwork of clans than a nation-state. So it aligned with some of the country’s worst brutes to rent their militias in a war on al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

The conduct of one of those brutes serves to exemplify the wider CIA approach. In November 2001, a militia commanded by Abdul Rashid Dostum summarily executed 2,000 Taliban fighters who had surrendered, by placing them in shipping containers and then firing their rifles into them. The CIA ended up building him a mansion. And he later went on to serve as a vice president to President Ashraf Ghani. Men like Dostum may be necessary to defeat a vicious foe like the Taliban. But they cannot play any meaningful role in the founding of a democracy.

If George W. Bush had been more like his father, it’s likely the Afghanistan war would have remained in the shadows, aligning U.S. Special Operations forces with local warlords. But after 9/11, Afghanistan was briefly a whole-of-government project for an angry and idealistic nation. America was fighting two wars in Afghanistan—one to build a resilient, centralized democratic state, the other to crush al-Qaeda through an alliance with the country’s regional warlords.

This is where the Democrats got it wrong. The problem with Bush’s handling of the Afghanistan war wasn’t, as John Kerry had claimed in 2004 when he dubbed our greatest enemy “Osama Been Forgotten,” that the pivot to Iraq deprived the Afghan conflict of presidential focus and resources. It was that Bush’s publicly stated goal of building a democracy was undermined by his own CIA’s campaign to align with the country’s regional tyrants.

This paradox came to the fore in Obama’s first term. He had campaigned on Afghanistan’s being the good war, and upon taking office, agreed to a surge in forces. General Stanley McChrystal wanted to re-create the counterinsurgency strategy that had quieted al-Qaeda in Iraq. Like Hadley, he wanted to nurture resilient, legitimate local institutions that would win the population cowed by the Taliban.

But when he arrived in Afghanistan, McChrystal found that in the rural provinces in particular, the real power resided with warlords. Their corruption and criminality at times were so rampant that many locals preferred the Taliban, in much the same way that a majority of Palestinians in the 2006 elections supported Hamas over the party of Yasir Arafat.

General Michael Flynn, who oversaw military intelligence for McChrystal in Afghanistan, was characteristically blunt about the problem in the first months of the surge. “If we are going to conduct a population-centric strategy in Afghanistan and we are perceived as backing thugs,” he said, “then we are just undermining ourselves.” And undermine us we did. For example, according to SIGAR, the U.S. spent $8.6 billion on efforts to eradicate Afghanistan’s poppy crop and heroin trade. Even as we did so, the CIA was paying off people such as Ahmed Wali Karzai, the brother of the country’s first president, Hamid Karzai, and himself a major drug kingpin. As a result, opium-poppy production in Afghanistan soared after 2002. The U.S. government was

George W. Bush’s publicly stated goal of building a democracy was undermined by his own CIA’s campaign to align with Afghanistan’s regional tyrants.
literally funding both sides of Afghanistan’s drug war.

This was a pattern. Too often, America was inadvertently funding both sides of its war in Afghanistan. McChrystal, for example, discovered that a major source of revenue for the Taliban was collecting protection money from the truck drivers who supplied U.S. and Afghan forces. The U.S. supply chain became a cash cow for the enemy. Between 2001 and 2011, the U.S. lavished Pakistan’s military with more than $20 billion in subsidy and equipment. All the while, Pakistan’s military intelligence service played a double game, occasionally helping to arrest Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders, but also providing sanctuary, funding, and training for the Taliban in its war in Afghanistan.

By 2010, McChrystal was gone. After he and his senior staff voiced their contempt for Obama and his vice president, Joe Biden, in a *Rolling Stone* cover story, General David Petraeus took over command. And even though he had helped devise the counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq, Petraeus was never able to make it stick in Afghanistan. He did recapture territory from the Taliban, but as the subsequent years showed, the Afghans had difficulty holding that territory.

Obama’s Afghanistan surge was accompanied by another spending spree. According to SIGAR, by 2010, U.S. funding for reconstruction exceeded Afghanistan’s entire gross domestic product. David Marsden, a former official for the U.S. Agency for International Development, told SIGAR the aid money was “like pouring a lot of water into a funnel; if you pour it too fast, the water overflows that funnel onto the ground. We were flooding the ground.” Take the “justice centers,” walled compounds that housed police stations, courtrooms, and jails. As soon as U.S. forces retreated, these buildings became dormant and rotted away. The power brokers in much of Afghanistan’s countryside had no interest in participating in transparent, Western justice. The old ways were better.

By Obama’s second term, he was looking for a way out of Afghanistan. The mission was significantly reduced, to focus on counterterrorism. And despite a much smaller military surge in the first year of Donald Trump’s presidency, even his hawks, such as his second national security adviser, H.R. McMaster, were no longer trying to build a modern, free Afghanistan. Instead, McMaster pressed the president to embrace a “good enough” strategy that would keep a small contingent of troops on the ground, primarily to conduct counterterrorism and advise a wobbly Afghan military in their war against the Taliban.

Trump grew impatient with Afghanistan by the end of his first year. He wanted to get out as quickly as possible. So in 2019, his envoy, war-on-terror fixture Zalmay Khalilzad, bargained away the one red line Trump’s predecessors would not cross: the legitimacy of the elected government in Kabul. He began direct negotiations with the Taliban, cutting out Ghani’s government in the process. It was ironic that Khalilzad would deliver such a blow because he had helped shepherd the process that led to the first national election for Afghanistan since its days as a parliamentary monarchy in the 1960s.

When Biden came into office, he was not obliged to continue with Trump’s strategy. He had an opportunity to slow things down and give the “good enough” plan a shot. He inherited a very small U.S. military footprint and a government that could at least secure a kind of freedom for Afghans living in the big cities. He could have pressured Pakistan, which armed and trained the Taliban and gave it sanctuary, to end that treachery. But he decided it was not worth the candle. He finished what Trump started and surrendered to the Taliban.

Today, Biden and his administration spin this surrender as prudence. They say the betrayal of Afghan allies was an inevitable consequence of ending a pointless war. They tout an airlift that left so many behind. And they hope Americans will soon forget that for 20 years our national might cultivated a fragile democratic experiment that today lies in ignominious ruins, under the boot of the Taliban.
The disastrous American military withdrawal from Afghanistan is complete. After a deadly ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) attack that killed 13 American servicemen, in the wake of a lightning Taliban offensive that left the country firmly in the hands of al-Qaeda’s long-standing ally, and amid the fallout from a half-baked evacuation effort that still left Americans stranded, the White House has worked feverishly to recast it all as a hard-fought success in the struggle to end America’s longest war.

The White House spin is absurd, verging on the insane. The Taliban are back in control, with the help of al-Qaeda and other extremist groups. They have captured billions of dollars’ worth of high-tech American hardware. And they have reversed two decades of U.S. military, counterinsurgency, and state-building efforts that cost the American taxpayer hundreds of billions, if not trillions, of dollars, not to mention thousands of lives.

Moreover, after years of sustained American efforts to beat back jihadism across the Middle East,
the virulent ideology of militant Islam and its practitioners is finding inspiration in the American defeat—much as it did in the mujahideen defeat of the Soviet army in 1989. That moment gave rise to a generation of international jihadists that was harnessed by Osama bin Laden and that ultimately led to the creation of al-Qaeda.

Worse, America’s ability to project power in South Asia is severely diminished. This will yield opportunities for China, Russia, and even Iran to fill the vacuum. The U.S. military could have maintained a small footprint in Afghanistan with minimal risk. Instead, our elected leaders fell prey to a false binary, promoted by neo-isolationists in recent years, that America either had to fight a “forever war” or quit the theater.

Remarkably, the Biden administration refuses to acknowledge any of this. Officials are doubling down on the narrative that “adults are back in charge” at the White House. Worse, the administration is peddling the abjectly false and Orwellian narrative that the Taliban are pragmatic actors, or even partners, with whom the United States is able to work to achieve common interests. Such depraved thinking cannot go unaddressed.

On August 17, 2021, during the bungled American pullout, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan told journalists at the White House that American officials were “in contact with the Taliban to ensure the safe passage of people to the airport. We are monitoring for any potential terrorist threats... including from ISIS-K.” In saying this, Sullivan conveyed the deranged notion that the Taliban, a terrorist group that partners with al-Qaeda and seeks the destruction of the American-led world order, were U.S. partners in the U.S. pullout.

Similarly, as plans took shape for a final military withdrawal in late August, Secretary of State Antony Blinken conveyed to the American people that the White House had placed its trust in the Taliban. He stated that America aimed to “incentivize the Taliban to make good on its commitments,” and that “if the Taliban is serious about the commitments that it’s making good on commitments they’ve repeatedly made on counterterrorism; and having some inclusivity in governance.”

The Taliban never cared about “making good” with the international community. As my colleague Thomas Joscelyn has pointed out, the Taliban rejected more than 30 demands by the U.S. and the United Nations to turn over Osama bin Laden over the years. After al-Qaeda perpetrated the deadly U.S. Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1988, the Taliban’s foreign minister vowed to “never give up Osama at any price.” Mullah Omar, the Taliban’s founder, refused to turn over bin Laden even after 9/11.

Nor is this ancient history. The Taliban and al-Qaeda continue to cooperate closely to this day. In 2020, for example, a United Nations report established that the Taliban “regularly consulted with al-Qaeda during negotiations with the United States and offered guarantees that it would honor their historical ties.” Earlier this year, the Defense Intelligence Agency also reported that the Taliban remained close with al-Qaeda and was planning large-scale offensives once the United States withdrew. Their joint targets: “population centers and Afghan government installations.”

It appears that General Frank McKenzie, commander of U.S. Central Command, and Rear Admiral Peter Vasely, head of U.S. forces on the ground in Afghanistan, did not heed the DIA report. Both referred to the Taliban as “our Afghan partners,” Politico reported in August. This may explain why they committed the grievous error of removing American military assets before evacuating diplomats, U.S. civilians, and Afghan allies. Indeed, there was no military cover for the civilian retreat. So when the Taliban predictably mounted their offensive and retook the country, Washington could not offer any protection to the civilians seeking to flee. The result was bedlam, leading to an ad hoc effort to evacuate thousands of people left stranded.

Adding insult to injury, when the American military withdrawal was complete, al-Qaeda released a two-page statement congratulating the Taliban on their victory. Moreover, Al Arabiya reported that al-Qaeda forces joined with the Taliban to attack the Afghan resistance forces that had gathered in the province of Panjshir, northeast of Kabul. This only confirmed what should have been obvious to all from the start: The Taliban view al-Qaeda, not the United States, as a partner.

Commentary
BUT THE BIDEN administration didn’t stop with the ridiculous notion that the Taliban were partners. It soon embarked on a campaign to brand the jihadi faction as moderate—relative to ISIS-K. Never mind that, upon sacking the country, the Taliban, the more powerful of the two groups, had just released hundreds or even thousands of ISIS operatives from jail. President Joe Biden himself stated on August 20 that he wanted “to make everybody understand—that the ISIS in Afghanistan are the—have been the sworn enemy of the Taliban.”

Biden repeated this four days later, noting the risks of “attack by a terrorist group known as ISIS-K, an ISIS affiliate in Afghanistan—which is the sworn enemy of the Taliban as well.”

Several media outlets soon regurgitated this bizarre line. Eric Schmidt of the New York Times wrote a head-spinning piece highlighting the threat from ISIS-K in Afghanistan, with the headline calling the group “a sworn enemy of both the Taliban and the United States.” Only later in the piece did Schmidt note that “ISIS-K has never been a major force in Afghanistan, much less globally.”

The truth is, while ISIS and the Taliban may have clashed, they have quite a lot in common. Their ideological underpinnings are virtually indistinguishable. They both seek to resurrect an Islamic caliphate. They both wield Islam to justify their violence and brutality. Their antipathy for America and the West is a core driver of their recruitment efforts. But even more remarkable is how similarly they evolved.

In 2013, ISIS grew out of the civil war in Syria. It rapidly conquered territory and laid waste to its enemies. The group was led by a fanatic known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who imposed hudud penalties in which thieves were punished by amputation and adulterers were stoned. Western innovation was strictly prohibited.

In the mid-1990s, the Taliban emerged out of the civil war in Afghanistan. They, too, rapidly conquered territory and imposed strict Sharia law. The group was led by a fanatic known as Mullah Omar, who also imposed hudud penalties on transgressors. And the Taliban also banned music, games, and certain Western technology.

ISIS was ultimately vanquished by a U.S.-led military coalition in 2016. The Taliban were ultimately vanquished by a U.S.-led invasion in 2002. In neither case was either group completely eradicated, however. They both fled to safer jurisdictions and regrouped.

In the Syrian theater, al-Qaeda and ISIS clashed and competed. This is the dynamic that the Biden administration seeks to exploit in its Afghanistan spin. In Syria, the Islamic State refused to recognize al-Qaeda’s authority. But it went a bit further than that. Al-Qaeda grew uncomfortable with the way in which ISIS had alienated the Muslim world with its brutality and nonchalant approach to killing. In 2014, al-Qaeda disavowed ISIS. Then, in 2016, al-Qaeda’s franchise in Syria—the violent jihadi group known as the Nusra Front and later Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—disasso-

DESCRIBING THE SYRIAN BRANCH OF AL-QAEDA AS ‘MODERATE’ DELIBERATELY IGNORES THE FRANCHISE’S LONG-STANDING TIES TO THE BROADER JIHADI MATRIX.

IT IS SAID that success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan. Not so in this case. The effort to rebrand the Taliban as “moderate” tracks back more than a decade. It could not have happened without the help of the Obama administration. That said, the Trump administration deserves its fair share of the blame.

In June 2010, President Barack Obama called the Taliban “a blend of hard-core ideologues, tribal leaders, kids that basically sign up because it’s the best job available to them. Not all of them are going to be thinking the same way about the Afghan government, about the future of Afghanistan.” Then-Vice President Biden in 2011 stated that the U.S. military was “break-
ing the momentum of the insurgents and the radicalized portion of the Taliban” (emphasis added). Biden claimed that same year that “the Taliban, per se, is not our enemy.” Thus began the Obama administration’s search for the “moderates” within one of the world’s deadliest terrorist organizations.

Discussions began in 2011 between the tiny but wealthy Persian Gulf nation of Qatar and the Taliban, with the notion that eventually the latter would open an embassy in Doha. By 2013, the Taliban created an official office there, with the full backing of Washington. The following year, the Obama administration authorized the release from Guantanamo of the “Taliban Five”—senior Taliban figures with a history of violence against the United States and known ties to al-Qaeda—in exchange for Army Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl, an American captured by the Taliban after (deliberately) wandering off his base. The Taliban detainees were sent to Qatar, where officials promised to monitor their activities.

This was akin to having a fox guard the henhouse. Persistent reports indicated that Qatar had been supporting and financing a range of Islamist terrorist groups. Nevertheless, Washington continued to encourage Qatar to take the lead in political negotiations over the future of the Taliban in Afghanistan. As the United States looked to exit Afghanistan, the Obama administration was angling for a diplomatic arrangement to provide cover for doing so. Qatar, warts and all, was America’s proxy negotiator.

In a strange turn of events, after Obama left the White House in 2016, the Trump administration sustained this effort. It did so even as the Taliban Five joined the Taliban’s negotiating team, reportedly at Doha’s urging. By 2019, the U.S. had concluded nine rounds of negotiations in Qatar. The process was gaining steam.

In 2020, President Donald Trump publicly implied that the Taliban could soon be ready to take responsibility for Afghanistan’s security. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo asserted that the Taliban had agreed to “break” their “relationship” with al-Qaeda and to “work alongside of us to destroy, deny resources” to al-Qaeda and to “have al-Qaeda depart from” Afghanistan. He later stated that the White House there can be no doubt that he set in motion the process of ceding Afghanistan to the Taliban, agreeing to a withdrawal deal on February 29, 2020, and then drawing down troops. This provided the Taliban with a timeline for their military offensive to reconquer the country.

The Trump team never presided over a military withdrawal, however. That was Biden’s ill-fated decision. One can only speculate as to what Trump would have done had he gone on to serve a second term—but there can be no doubt that he set in motion the process of ceding Afghanistan to the Taliban, agreeing to a withdrawal deal on February 29, 2020, and then drawing down troops. This provided the Taliban with a timeline for their military offensive to reconquer the country.

In January 2021, the Trump team handed the baton to the Biden administration. Despite wholesale changes in policy and personnel, Biden retained Trump’s appointed U.S. envoy to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, who had played a crucial role in working with the Qataris. Khalilzad kept the ill-fated dialogue alive with the Taliban while promoting the fiction that this was a pragmatic group that could work with Washington. In May, he even slammed projections that the Taliban might overrun Kabul after the American departure as “mistaken.” He insisted that the Taliban “seek normalcy in terms of relations—acceptability, removal from sanctions, not to remain a pariah.” So much for that.

The United States has not just lost America’s longest war in a spectacularly embarrassing fashion. It has lost the narrative. The facts speak for themselves. The Taliban are not partners. They are not friends. And they are not moderate. Al-Qaeda has helped to make that abundantly clear in recent weeks. As Joscelyn noted in the...
Long War Journal, al-Qaeda’s senior leadership has gloated about the Taliban’s return to power, praising it as a “historic victory” and calling upon Muslims worldwide to support the “Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.”

Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of the entire al-Qaeda network, has further sworn an oath of allegiance to the Taliban’s emir, Hibatullah Akhundzada. This should come as no surprise, of course. Al-Qaeda’s leader has maintained an oath of loyalty to the Taliban’s emir for more than two decades. But this history only underscores the absurdity of the Biden administration’s claims.

In 2014, al-Qaeda announced a new franchise: al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent. It was deliberately created to support the Taliban. In the meantime, other al-Qaeda affiliates, such as Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, have long operated in areas of Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban, suggesting a modus vivendi, at minimum. My colleague Bill Roggio continues to track the presence of al-Qaeda throughout Afghanistan. It was significant before the pullout (Roggio predicted for that reason, among others, that the U.S. withdrawal would be a disaster). The al-Qaeda presence in Afghanistan, now that America is gone, is only likely to grow.

The glue that binds it all together is the Haqqani network, a terrorist group that is both one of al-Qaeda’s closest allies and also an integral component of the Taliban’s network. The Taliban’s new interior minister, Sirajuddin Haqqani, embodies this relationship. He has served as the Taliban’s deputy emir since 2015, while a recent UN report identified him as a member of the “wider al-Qaeda leadership.”

The Taliban’s strong ties to al-Qaeda only reinforce the fact that the group has not grown more moderate or pragmatic in recent years. But one need not look to al-Qaeda for evidence of this. The group recently released propaganda venerating its “suicide squads.” In the same video, the Taliban blamed American “policy” for the attacks of 9/11—attacks they have never attributed to al-Qaeda.

In perhaps the clearest sign of what is to come, the Taliban have now formed a new government, and there’s nothing moderate about it. Many of the cabinet ministers have been sanctioned by the U.S. and the UN for terrorism. Several were Guantanamo Bay detainees. Two of them appear on the State Department’s Rewards for Justice program, whereby the U.S. government offers millions of dollars for information that could lead to their kill or capture.

IN LATE AUGUST, in the wake of the televised horrors out of Kabul, President Biden continued to appeal to the Taliban to help facilitate the departure of stranded American citizens and others from the country. Out of sheer desperation, he tried to wield the “power” of the United Nations. A recent UN resolution “sent a clear message about what the international community expects the Taliban to deliver on moving forward, notably freedom of travel, freedom to leave,” Biden said in a televised speech. “And together, we are joined by over 100 countries that are determined to make sure the Taliban upholds those commitments.”

The UN likely had little to do with what came next. The Taliban ultimately granted the U.S. and others permission to facilitate a number of evacuation flights. This was by no means a collaboration or a nod to a budding relationship with Washington. It was a tactical consideration in the group’s longer-term objective of reconquering Afghanistan. Mission accomplished. 

IN PERHAPS THE CLEAREST SIGN OF WHAT IS TO COME, THE TALIBAN HAVE NOW FORMED A NEW GOVERNMENT, AND THERE’S NOTHING MODERATE ABOUT IT.
American Jews: A Threat Report

Will the changes of the past 20 years be enough to end 350 years of a unique relationship?

By Josef Joffe

Is the Jewish-American love affair over? This is the question U.S. Jews are nervously asking—even sober souls not given to hysteria. The evidence is piling up: murder from Pittsburgh to Jersey City, Jews assaulted in West Hollywood and Times Square, vandalized synagogues, the BDS movement, ostracized Jewish college students, the ever-unfriendlier mainstream media. Add anti-Zionism, that veiled cousin of anti-Semitism, and the mob that stormed the Capitol on January 6, 2021, and inevitably, the memories of 20th-century fascism well up. Yet I still believe that “it can’t happen here,” unlike Sinclair Lewis, who used the phrase in bitter irony as the title of his 1935 novel about the attempted destruction of democracy in the United States.

That destruction does not happen in Lewis’s novel, nor does it in Philip Roth’s counter-historical tale of a Depression-era Charles Lindbergh presidency, The Plot Against America. In both dystopias, the good America triumphs over anti-Semitism and homegrown totalitarianism. Back in the present and in the real world, Donald Trump proved not even a pale copy of Mussolini despite the efforts of his enemies to liken him to the fascists of old, and his assault on norms as a return to the days of the Weimar Republic. The Weimar analogy betrays ignorance of the real thing. Weimar was 14 years old when it fell to Nazis and Communists; the U.S. Constitution has defied all attacks for 234 years. The Great Depression spawned Hitler in Europe; over here, it brought forth FDR.

So, amid justified fear, let’s first lay out the good news. America, I will still argue, is different; hence, three cheers for the country’s genuine, not self-hyping

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Commentary
exceptionalism. Why did Jews do so well in this "blessed plot," to crib from the Bard? How did the "tired, huddled masses" make it from the Lower East Side to Scarsdale? How did their offspring move from the cheder to Columbia and into the highest reaches of government? Think Cabinet members such as Henry Morgenthau and Henry Kissinger plus a slew of Supreme Court judges from Brandeis to Breyer. Hollywood is another towering symbol of Jewish achievement, though I will concede that the transgressive humor of Groucho Marx and Mel Brooks would not make it in today's hyper-woke times. Recall the self-ironical black sheriff in Blazing Saddles who turns racial stereotypes into belly laughs. Today, that would be a "micro-aggression."

Jews also flourished in the Kaiser's Germany and continued to thrive in the doomed Weimar Republic. One-third of Germany's Nobel Prizes went to Jews. But it ended in the Shoah. Meanwhile, America remained the "Land of Gold" it had been in the Jewish imagination on the far side of the Atlantic. This is no fluke of history; it is integral to the American experience. Before we get to today's darker parts, let's look at the three pillars of the Jewish-American house—a palace, actually.* It has no analogue in the 2,000 years after the destruction of the Temple. There was no such sustained Golden Age anywhere.

Chapter 1 began in 1654, more than a century before the Founding. Escaping from the Inquisition almost 400 years ago, 23 Jews from Brazil's Recife arrived in New Amsterdam, now better known as New York. "Take us in, please," they pleaded. In response, Dutch governor Peter Stuyvesant insisted on driving off this "deceitful race" of "usurers" and "blasphemers." Back home in Holland, where its Jewish brethren had offered support and succor for its efforts, the Dutch West India Company was not impressed by Stuyvesant's bigotry. It overruled him in the name of religious freedom. He buckled but fired off an angry letter: "Giving [the Jews] liberty, we cannot refuse the Lutherans and Papists." Thus, the first pillar of American exceptionalism was born; dankjewel, Mijnheer (thank you, sir). Call it "equal-opportunity racism," and a wondrous blessing it was for the Israelites. For once, they were not singled out as Christ killers and corrupters of the righteous. Here, they were suddenly the equals of at least some Christians, if only as targets of revulsion. For the Dutch Reformed Church, Lutherans were the real enemies. So were Catholics as the fifth column of the Pope. Quakers were also infra dig.

Indeed, all the way into the 20th century, "Papists," especially Irish, were tainted with split loyalty; so the Jews had company. It wasn't until 1960 that a Catholic, John Kennedy, could make it into the White House. Ironically, there was comfort to be found in bigotry, because it was inflicted all around. Jews were not the only outsiders. Irish hated Italians, and both despised Poles, while WASPs loathed everybody of different faith and origin. Mutual contempt was God-sent; suddenly, Jews had no particular "advantage" in the market of vilification. The Klan and the Know-Nothings were equal-opportunity racists, too, going after Blacks, Jews, and Catholics.

The second pillar was Thomas Jefferson's "wall of separation between Church & State," which was duly enshrined in the First Amendment. For the Jews, it delivered a sturdy shelter. The state could not promote any religion. In the Old Country, though, Church and State had been one—a tight alliance of altar and throne. So the wrong belief could bring in the executioner. Jews were ghettoized, slain, or expelled. Judenrein was not just a 20th-century invention. Yet in the United States, the no-establishment clause was the foundational law. Every house of worship was on its own, and none was granted a state privilege. America was a free market for religions. Unable to compel, everybody had to compete. Like no other place on earth, the U.S. became the land of "supply-side religion," which explains the limitless spread of denominations. Never before had Jews enjoyed so much safety and freedom.

The third pillar of exceptionalism is no less wondrous. No Christian-majority nation is as "Jewish" as the United States. Unlike Europe's Christians, the Puritans returned to the Hebrew Bible, unearthing their faith's roots in the Torah. "The God of Israel is among us," orated John Winthrop when he and fellow Pilgrims set out on their ocean voyage on the Arbella in

* I first wrote about these three pillars in an article titled "Why It Won't Happen Here," in the American Interest in 2019.
Historically tainted as an alien race, Jews are now labeled as members of the Supremacy. They are losing their home in FDR Land or looking at eviction if they don’t behave.

1630. They were reenacting Israel’s battle against Pharaoh. Their flight was like the Exodus, and in the New World, they found the Promised Land 2.0, bequeathed to them under a covenant with the Almighty.

For Cotton Mather, the most important early American thinker, the Jews were God’s “beloved people.” Martin Luther had wanted to “set fire to the synagogues of the devil’s children.” For the Puritans, America was the home of “Christian Israel.” Jewish law entered into the early American corpus. Children were christened Abraham and Sarah. The Puritans would build a “Cittie upon a Hill,” the New Jerusalem. America is dotted with biblical place names like Zion and, how apropos, New Canaan. Europe has no such towns. So savor this bizarre twist. America- and Jew-haters around the world are perversely right when they denounce the U.S. as a “Jewish” country.

Why worry, then, and mull aliyah to Israel? This rosy Jewish-American story has not ended, but the darker passages are multiplying. Let’s run the gamut from politics to culture.

American Jews, who voted 77 percent for Joe Biden, are nonetheless in the process of losing their political home of a hundred years, the Democratic Party. For their forefathers, FDR stood right next to Moses, while Republicans occupied an impenetrable WASP redoubt. “Redlining” was then used against both blacks and Jews.

The cracks became visible in 2008, the year of Barack Obama’s first victory. Even during the transition from his election to his presidency, Obama began to intimate that he was ready to turn away from Israel and tilt toward Iran, the country that has trumpeted the Jewish state’s obliteration since the Khomeinist revolution of 1979. They don’t mean it metaphorically.

Now, though Joe Biden and his Jewish secretary of state, Tony Blinken, are sympathetic to Israel, they are back on Obama’s road to Tehran. The ancient charge of dual loyalty and misbegotten riches, add in our day Jewish “whiteness” in a party dominated by the Woke who depict Israel as a stronghold of colonialism and racism. What an irony! Historically tainted as an alien race, Jews are now fingered as members of the Supremacy. They are losing their home in FDR Land or looking at eviction if they don’t behave.

Black people make up a constituency far larger and even more committed to the Democratic Party than the Jews. The civil-rights alliance between the two ethnicities broke down long ago—think not Martin Luther King, but Louis Farrakhan. Now it’s open enmity toward Jews on the part of the activist avant-garde. “Intersectionality” makes for a bizarre syllogism. Jews are white (oppressors), Arabs are POCs (victims), and Israel-cum–American Jewry is the common enemy.

Another crumbling base is the university, a natural habitat of Jews in 20th-century America. In a post-agrarian economy, knowledge capital was attracting ever-higher demand and fetching ever-higher returns. So it was far easier for Jews to break down barriers in the thought industry than in Big Banking and business. Eventually, achievement trumped ancestry, and excellence beat embedded WASP social standing. With discrimination waning, the post–World War II dispensation was good for the Jews and good for the coun-

Commentary
George W. Bush’s dictum has been appropriated by the cultural left: ‘You are either with us or against us.’ And so Jews must choose. Not so long ago, they did not have to.

try, especially because it came with an extra bonus: thousands of brilliant Jewish thinkers and scientists escaping from Hitler, then from Stalin. Jews drove the rise of the postwar U.S. university. A nice set-up if you can keep it.

This Jewish Garden of Eden is now wilting, outside the hard sciences. Relentlessly spreading “critical race theory” and identity studies, “safe spaces” and “microaggression,” promote activism, not analytical acumen and dispassionate research. Nor does equity-as-equal-outcome favor equal opportunity, the very idea that made Jewish achievement in America possible, as it ought to be for Asian Americans now. Neither does it favor excellence springing from ambition, talent, and the free competition of ideas.

With their culture of learning, questioning, and gainsaying, Jews are taking a hit. In the Age of Woke, achievement is not praiseworthy but proof of privilege and injustice. This ideology is harming the American university. Sixteen of them still make the world’s top 20, but gifted Jews are absconding from academia. In the recent past, the proportion of Jewish students in the Ivy League has shrunk significantly.* In my own field, political science (practically an American discipline), Jewish graduate-school applications are dwindling. Jews now find their careers elsewhere, from information technology to the investment industry.

Finally, there is the war within—with a growing number of Jewish voices in the anti-Zionist chorus. This is an old and not just American story. The more anti-Semitism, the more numerous the Jews moving outside the community. “Be nice to me,” they are saying; “I am not one of them.” This is “human, all too human,” to borrow from Nietzsche. As a bitter joke had it, über-German Jews in the Weimar Republic distributed posters screaming “Out With Us!” Please don’t hold us responsible for those bearded Jews piling in from the Pale.

Today, in the age of Critical Theory (a French import originally invented in Germany), it makes good sense to evade the charge of “Whiteness,” aka irremediable racism. It makes even better sense to be on the right side of the culture war when the class claiming cultural hegemony dominates the market: schools, universities, publishing houses, foundations, media, and the arts. Add Big Business and public bureaucracies. This is where income, writing contracts, and status are parcelled out to certified bien pensants.

George W’s dictum has been appropriated by the cultural left: “You are either with us or against us.” And so Jews must choose. Not so long ago, they did not have to, resting comfortably in a land where they could be both social-justice warriors and keepers of their ancient intellectual traditions. They could celebrate real diversity and defy prepackaged thinking. They could root for both America and the Jewish state. Then mayor of New York, Ed Koch scored a good laugh against a reporter waving the dual-loyalty flag, wisecracking: “If Israel ever attacks us, Jews will fight for America.” That comfort zone is shrinking, and laughter would be counterrevolutionary.

The German-Jewish thinker Gershom Scholem gave this melancholy answer many decades ago: “The love affair between Jews and Germans has basically remained one-sided.” Time to pawn the engagement ring in the U.S. as well? The correct answer remains no. For starters, we should not expect the three pillars of the American creed to crumble, as fearsome as the news from the culture war may be. We are talking 400 years as against 20. Culture and history do not change as quickly as cellphone generations. Ever since the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, enforced Goodthink has regularly rolled over the country, and yet the creed had proved stronger. Its seeds were planted back in the 1600s when Peter Stuyvesant lost. So too the Know-Nothings and the KKK, Charles Lindbergh and Father Coughlin, the Jew-baiting Detroit radio priest.

Since the early 18th century, four Great Awakenings have swept America. They share with today’s Great Awokening foundational religious features. You are die-hard sinners, and you must repent and make amends for your evil past—in the most recent case, colonialism, slavery, and “white supremacy.” Take a knee and go with the new gospel. This wave is in full swing, but waves do recede. So Jews and a myriad liberal cohorts might take a deep breath. Frenzy does consume itself. But as the song goes: “Don’t know where, don’t know when.”

Historical analogies prove nothing, but data may. It is true that the refurbished left is scaling the “commanding heights” of the culture, to borrow from Lenin, scooping up victories from the classroom to the


American Jews: A Threat Report : October 2021
The three pillars of Jew-friendly American exceptionalism were not built on sand, and they hold up the larger American creed across all faiths.

board room. But the hoi polloi won’t take the brew of enforced enlightenment even after two decades of agitation. In that period, “total favorable opinion of Israel” actually rose from 62 to 72 percent. Is Israel an ally and/or friend? Up slightly from 60 to 62. U.S. support for Israel? Adding “about right” and “too little” yields between 60 and 77 percent. According to Gallup, the ratio of pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian sympathizers remains roughly 2 to 1. How attached are you to Israel? Even two-thirds of younger Jews (18–40) affirm such a bond. In short, the love affair is not exactly one-sided, say these reassuring numbers.

The number of Jews seeking asylum on the other side of the lineup is growing, and the adversaries of the Jewish state have the stronger battalions among the so-called elite. All true, but continuity since 1654 is not nothing, especially given the long-term stability of opinion as reflected in the polls in spite of recurrent waves of anti-Semitism. Certainly, this trend contrasts sharply with Europe whence, by 1654, Jews had been expelled from England, Spain, and Germany. The Golden Age of German Jewry was over after a few decades, lasting from Bismarck to the Third Reich. The three pillars of Jew-friendly American exceptionalism were not built on sand, and they hold up the larger American creed across all faiths. What started out with a few Brazilian Jews in New Amsterdam has now expanded to more than 7 million Jews in America. Meanwhile, the Jewish population in Britain, France, and Germany is shrinking.

If it does “happen here,” to recall Sinclair Lewis, America will have to betray what it has become. Anti-Semitic tweets, inflammatory oratory, and BDS campaigns are not enough for a victorious “Plot Against America.” Do furrow your brow, but don’t pack your bags, as Jews in France are doing.\footnote{\textit{The New Republic}}
Abortion’s Texas Twist

The bad jurisprudence arising from Roe v. Wade has come full circle

By Adam J. White

To see a black hole, look indirectly. Its immense gravity distorts everything around it, forcing strange movements around seemingly empty space. So too with Roe v. Wade. To understand the Supreme Court’s abortion jurisprudence, don’t look for Roe’s substance—it is vanishingly small—but look instead for its effect on the constitutional institutions that have been pulled into its orbit.

Roe’s critics, and I am very much one, tend to focus on its constitutional vacuity. For good reason, we perennially quote John Hart Ely, one of the 20th century’s leading liberal constitutionalists, who recognized from the start in 1973 that Roe “is not constitutional law and gives almost no sense of an obligation to try to be.” Yet for Roe and its sequel, Planned Parenthood v. Casey (1992), the emptiness itself took on immense weight, asserting a gravitational pull on ever more parts of America’s constitutional government.

So look past Roe, to the Court itself, where otherwise mundane cases raising questions about old non-Roe precedents become a bloody proxy war over Roe’s own precedential weight. Then look beyond the Court, where Senate confirmation hearings and presidential campaigns have changed profoundly due to the politics of Roe. And look to debates over the Senate’s procedural rules and the nation’s voting laws, which now have begun to center around Roe. As with the rest, they have already been and will continue to be deformed by it, too.

Finally, consider what just occurred in Texas: The state legislature enacted a law meant clearly to defy Roe and Casey, yet with caveats purporting to obey Roe and Casey.

The new law was signed by Governor Greg Abbott, but it contained a caveat preventing him, or any other state officer, from enforcing it.

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And Texas abortionists, who could have invoked the new law’s caveat and asserted their rights under Roe and Casey, instead declared themselves to be out of the abortion business.

In a normal world, these would make no sense. But in Roe’s world, they are inevitable.

The COURT may overturn Roe next year. It soon will hear oral arguments in Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization, a lawsuit challenging Mississippi’s recent law prohibiting most abortions after the 15th week of pregnancy. The law is seemingly irreconcilable with Roe’s and Casey’s prohibition against laws placing an “undue burden” on the exercise of abortion rights, including laws that prohibit abortion of unborn babies who are not yet “viable” outside the womb.

The Court could strike down Mississippi’s law under Roe; or it could uphold the law without overruling Roe; or it could uphold the law by overruling Roe; or the nine justices could split into a messy mix of individual opinions that decide the case without deciding the principle. But pro-life critics of Roe are justifiably hopeful.

Especially in Texas. In May, Governor Abbott and the state legislature enacted Senate Bill 8, the Heartbeat Act, which declares unlawful the intentional abortion of an unborn baby once the heartbeat is detectable—which can be as early as six weeks into the pregnancy.

At the signing ceremony, Governor Abbott declared that the Heartbeat Act “ensures that the life of every unborn child who has a heartbeat will be saved from the ravages of abortion.” After thanking legislators and pro-life groups for passing the bill, he took out his pen to sign. “Now,” he said, “we’re about to make it law.”

A law, that is, with two very significant twists.

First, while the law’s core provision, the heartbeat standard, is a direct challenge to the Court’s abortion precedents, it also contains a provision nominally respecting those precedents. The Act’s second twist prohibits Texas’s own state and local law-enforcement apparatus from actually enforcing the law. “No enforcement” of the Act “may be taken or threatened by this state, a political subdivision, a district or county attorney, or an executive or administrative officer or employee of this state or a political subdivision against any person.” Instead, the Act provides that enforcement will occur exclusively through private litigants. It says that “any person, other than an employee of a state or local governmental entity in this state, may bring a civil action against any person who” knowingly performs, induces, aids, or abets an abortion.

Normally, a new law regulating abortion is met immediately by federal lawsuits, invoking the Court’s nebulous, ad hoc “undue burden” standard in the friendliest federal trial court available to them. The challengers sue the state or local officials charged with enforcing the law, in addition to the state itself, asking the court to issue an injunction prohibiting the officials from their imminent enforcement of it; the act of seeking injunctions against specific individuals avoids the states’ own sovereign immunity. (When the Obama administration filed a lawsuit to block Arizona’s own immigration laws, it sued not just the state itself but also the governor, and it asked the court for an “injunction against the State of Arizona, and its officers, agents, and employees, prohibiting the enforcement of” the state law.)

But the Heartbeat Act prohibits enforcement by state and local officials. Therefore, its opponents have no one to sue. And it is difficult if not impossible to identify which private citizens would file their own enforcement actions until those actions commence, so they can’t be preemptively sued either.

That’s exactly the point. Given the history of preemptive injunctions against state officials enforcing new abortion laws, “we knew we had to have another way,” the Heartbeat Act’s senate sponsor told the Wall Street Journal. And they came up with one.

Such private enforcement frameworks are not unprecedented. Federal laws have long deputized private litigants to enforce environmental laws, for example. And the False Claims Act empowers plaintiffs to be bounty hunters against those who would defraud the government. Now Texas has deputized the public directly.

While the Texas law’s core provision is a direct challenge to the Court’s abortion precedents, it also contains a provision nominally respecting those precedents.
to enforce state abortion policy, inviting people to monitor other people and report on them, for court-awarded fees of $10,000 or more for every unlawful abortion they successfully litigate against.

This private-enforcement provision was the reason the Supreme Court declined to block the Heartbeat Act from going into effect in August. A month earlier, a coalition of abortion providers and activists had filed a federal lawsuit, asking a trial judge to block the law preemptively. Since they lacked defendants self-evidently empowered to enforce the law, they sued a state judge and a court clerk as stand-ins for all state judges and clerks who would oversee private litigation enforcing the Act. They also named a private defendant whom they expected would file lawsuits to enforce the Act, and some state officers whom they alleged would play roles in enforcing it.

The trial judge did not dismiss the lawsuit, but the court of appeals froze the litigation in place. The challengers then petitioned the Supreme Court for emergency relief—namely, to block the Texas law from going into effect while their constitutional litigation moved forward. Two days later, the Supreme Court denied the request, spurring abortion advocates’ panicked and enraged criticism and stoking their fears that Roe itself is no longer viable.

In DECLINING to block the Texas law preemptively, the Court’s reasoning was straightforward, and it had nothing to do with the merits of the pro-abortion groups’ constitutional arguments. “The applicants now before us have raised serious questions regarding the constitutionality of the Texas law,” the Court briefly explained, but “their application also presents complex and novel antecedent procedural questions”—namely, questions about how the challengers could maintain a lawsuit without naming state officials who would enforce the Heartbeat Act.

It “is unclear whether the named defendants in this lawsuit can or will seek to enforce the Texas law against the applicants in a manner that might permit our investigation,” the Court noted. “Nor is it clear whether, under existing precedent, this Court can issue an injunction against state judges asked to decide a law-suit under Texas’s law.” The Court sent these procedural questions back to the lower courts to consider in the first instance. And it pointedly declined to offer any thoughts on whether the Heartbeat Act is constitutional.

This surely was the proper decision. Whatever constitutional arguments might surround the Act, the Supreme Court is not a debating society. Rather, it exists only to decide particular kinds of “cases” and “controversies,” as the Constitution itself enumerates. Such cases must be brought by litigants who suffer real injuries caused by the people they are suing and who are therefore seeking actual remedies from the courts. In their attempt to freeze the Heartbeat Act, the pro-abortion challengers were putting the judicial branch’s cart before its horse, filing a lawsuit now and hoping to figure out the defendants later.

In their attempt to freeze the Heartbeat Act, the pro-abortion challengers were filing a lawsuit now and hoping to figure out the defendants later.

That is true, too, of the Biden administration’s subsequent lawsuit against Texas. The Justice Department’s complaint, filed in September, named only one defendant, the State of Texas. At the end of its complaint, DOJ asked the trial court for relief against the state and “all of its officers, employees, and agents, including private parties who would bring suit under” the Heartbeat Act.* Because it does not name any defendants other than the state and does not indicate which public officials would enforce the Act in a way that harms the federal government, this suit should fail.

But note the Biden administration’s broad characterization of Texas’s “agents,” which includes “private parties who would bring suit” to enforce the Heartbeat Act. Setting aside the fact that the complaint does not specifically identify any such people—the DOJ is effectively asking for an injunction against every person in Texas—it’s not clear that private plaintiffs who would attempt to enforce the Act’s citizen-suit provision would actually qualify as “agents” of the State of Texas. The Supreme Court cast doubt on such a theory years ago, in Vermont Agency of Natural Resources v. U.S. ex rel. Stevens (2000), when it emphasized that a similar private-enforcement framework in the federal False Claims Act did not create an “agency” relationship between private plaintiffs and the federal government.

Indeed, in the two decades since the case, the DOJ has repeatedly argued in legal briefs that private plain-

* To show that the federal government’s own interests are harmed by Texas’s law, the DOJ complaint provides a detailed explanation of various ways in which the federal government funds abortions—an eye-opening narrative that may attract new criticism of its own.
tiffs enforcing the False Claims Act’s bounty-hunter provision are not the government’s agents. Such a plaintiff "is not an agent of the Government, has no Government powers, does not represent the Government, and cannot be understood to represent the Government," the DOJ argued in one such brief. In another, it argued that a bounty-hunter plaintiff "does not sue as the United States or even its statutorily-designated agent." To succeed in its lawsuit against Texas, the Biden Justice Department will need either to disavow that reasoning, or to convince judges that the Heartbeat Act is different.

Finally, the Biden administration will have to contend with a 2001 decision by the Fifth Circuit that rejected similar attempts to block a Louisiana law empowering women to sue abortionists for harms suffered by them and their babies. The challengers had failed to show the requisite connection between government officials and private tort lawsuits that the Louisiana law had allowed; plaintiffs “need to find an actual enforcement connection—some enforcement power or act that can be enjoined—between the defendant official and the challenged statute,” the Fifth Circuit explained. Indeed, the judges were offered not a single precedent “in which a federal court [has] enjoined enforcement of a statute” with only “private civil, but no criminal penalties.” Again, it is difficult to see how the Heartbeat Act is any different.

The Biden administration, the private pro-abortion litigants, and the justices who dissented from the Court’s decision not to intervene preemptively will also need to grapple with the fact that the Heartbeat Act explicitly preserves Roe and Casey’s “undue burden” protection so long as the Court itself does not overrule those precedents. Given the Act’s Roe-Casey caveat, how can challengers show that the Act undermines Roe and Casey?

The Act’s critics point to the fact that abortionists in Texas have stopped aborting. “To date, abortion providers have ceased providing services prohibited by S.B. 8,” the Biden administration’s complaint alleges. “It takes little imagination to discern Texas’s goal—to make it too risky for an abortion clinic to operate in the State.” But this isn’t a question of imagination; it’s a question of evidence and the Act’s self-evident terms. No part of the Heartbeat Act actually prohibits abortion clinics from aborting babies, so long as the Act’s own protection of Casey’s “undue burden” standard remains intact. An abortion provider’s own worries that it might someday need to litigate that question in defense against a future civil lawsuit does not give the abortion provider legal standing to file a preemptive lawsuit today. Plaintiffs “cannot manufacture standing by choosing” to modify their actions “based on hypothetical future harm that is not certainly impending,” the Court explained in 2013.

The authors of the Biden administration’s new complaint are clearly aware of this problem. They argue that the Heartbeat Act “fundamentally distorts” the undue-burden standard by “limiting the scope of evidence on which a defendant may rely” and other tactics, but they offer no actual explanation of what that would mean, in practice, in a Heartbeat Act case. Once more, the Court’s 2013 decision seems dispositive: “We decline to abandon our usual reluctance to endorse standing theories that rest on speculation about the decisions of independent actors,” the Court wrote.

The Biden administration and abortion providers surely would prefer to litigate all these things now, in the lawsuits of their own choosing. But until there is a connection between Texas law-enforcement officials and the Heartbeat Act’s implementation, or a real case in which private plaintiffs are trying to enforce the Act for a particular abortion, there is no case for the federal courts to adjudicate.

**The federal courts’ limited power is only part of this conversation. All of us should be wary of the legal framework that Texas has created in the Heartbeat Act.**

**But the federal courts’ limited power is only part of this conversation. All of us, especially Constitution-minded conservatives, should be wary of the legal framework that Texas has created.**

Our system of government, at the federal and state levels, depends on the bedrock of constitutional structure, separating government powers and committing them to the proper parts of government. But the Heartbeat Act, like so many other statutes that empower civil suits, sits uneasily in that framework.

In the aforementioned Vermont case, in which the Court considered the federal False Claims Act’s private-enforcement provision, Justice Scalia’s opinion made note of arguments that such a framework interferes with the executive branch’s own constitutional powers and responsibilities. The Court did not decide that matter, because the parties in the case had focused on completely different constitutional
issues. But Justice Scalia and his colleagues took care to highlight the possible executive-power problem.

They weren’t the first. Eleven years earlier, the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel (OLC) published a long and detailed memorandum, written by William Barr, arguing that the False Claims Act’s private-lawsuit provision (known traditionally as a qui tam law) was, in fact, unconstitutional.

By such laws, “Congress has attempted to create universal standing to prosecute purely public offenses,” posing “a devastating threat to the Executive’s constitutional authority and to the doctrine of separation of powers,” Barr wrote. “If qui tam suits are upheld, it would mean Congress will have carte blanche to divest the executive branch of its constitutional authority to enforce the laws and vest that authority in its own corps of private bounty hunters.”

The Court’s Vermont decision concluded that qui tam laws do not violate the judicial branch’s constitutional duties, but their constitutionality with respect to executive power has remained an open question.*

Conservative constitutionalists should not shrug this question off lightly. In 1997, Justice Scalia and his colleagues saw a similar issue in the Brady Act, where Congress had delegated responsibility for enforcing the new handgun rules to state law-enforcement officials instead of the president. “The Brady Act effectively transfers this responsibility to thousands of [officers] in the 50 States, who are left to implement the program without meaningful Presidential control,” he wrote. “The insistence of the Framers upon unity in the Federal Executive—to ensure vigor and accountability—is well known.... That unity would be shattered, bounty-hunter qui tam lawsuits dates back hundreds of years, but for “obvious reasons,” such lawsuits “were highly subject to abuse.”

Chief Justice Roberts has noted the constitutional questions raised by bounty-hunter lawsuits, too. In a 1993 article, he took note of Barr’s OLC opinion and observed that modern respect for the pre-constitutional tradition of qui tam lawsuits “must be tempered with a recognition that the Framers were moving from a unitary system of government to one of separated powers,” such that bounty-hunter statutes’ tension with constitutional executive power needed to be taken seriously. The article spurred Senator Chuck Grassley to raise the issue during Roberts’s Senate confirmation hearing in 2005; Roberts reiterated to the Senate that these constitutional questions continued to surround the federal bounty-hunter law and said that he would approach them with an open mind.

So should we. Granted, the previous debates arose in the context of the federal constitution, and so the issues noted by Scalia, Roberts, and Barr do not apply squarely to Texas’s state-level enactment of the Heartbeat Act. But the federal Constitution’s principles exist for good reason, and the same kinds of concerns raised in the earlier debate inform this one, too. Do we want state legislatures to outsource important or sensitive public policies to individual litigants and plaintiffs’ lawyers, and the trial judges who oversee the cases, instead of the governors and other officials who we elect to be responsible for the execution of the laws?

The abortion of babies is a profoundly terrible thing, and we should welcome any lawful measure that reduces it. But we also should recognize that the Texas law will be a new model for activists in blue and red states to outsource other policies to bounty hunters. The Heartbeat Act’s novel approach, seeking to deter abortion while avoiding trial judges’ injunctions, is just the latest sophistry echoing Roe’s own sophistic legal calamity, the ad hoc and baseless doctrines that judges created to strip states of their constitutional authority to legislate on the question of aborting babies. Only Roe and its progeny could have produced such a surreal statute—and the chaotic political and legal responses to it. Such things will continue to be warped by Roe’s gravity until the Court finally reconsider its vacuous 1973 decision. But let’s hope that this new deformation of constitutional administration, which Roe produced in Texas, proves short-lived. Near*.

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and the power of the President would be subject to reduction, if Congress could act as effectively without the President as with him, by simply requiring state officers to execute the laws.”

It is dangerous enough to transfer executive power to many disparate executives. It is still more worrisome to transfer it to the people at large, to act through civil lawsuits. As Scalia and his colleagues noted in 2000 in the Vermont case, the tradition of

* The issue reached the Court in 2019, but a settlement mooted the case.

Abortion’s Texas Twist : October 2021
For millions of Americans, the much-heralded return to post-Trump “normalcy” feels disturbingly abnormal. In early September, President Joe Biden announced sweeping COVID-19 vaccine requirements for federal employees and those working at large private companies. This all-but-certainly-unconstitutional declaration came only weeks after the Supreme Court shot down Biden’s earlier dalliance with unconstitutionality in the form of an extended eviction moratorium. When Biden announced that scheme, he himself recognized it was “not likely to pass constitutional muster.” Presidents enacting measures they know to be unconstitutional is not exactly a return to the good old days of calm and moderation.

If you’re an American who tunes out formal politics altogether, it would still be hard to miss a pervasive sense of division and reproach in the air. Once-adored artists such as Lin-Manuel Miranda are cast out of the progressive pantheon for noncompliance with Wokeness. Your streaming television channels now offer up content split into race- and gender-based categories (having removed entirely some programming that offends woke sensibilities). Similarly, elementary-school teachers separate classrooms by skin tone in a misguided effort to teach kids about group differences. In Richmond, Virginia, a time capsule buried 133 years ago was recently dug up and intentionally replaced with new items, among them loving mementos of the social-justice movement.

Public excommunication, overtly racialized entertainment, segregated classrooms, the literal erasure of history: Is this really what America was like before Donald Trump became president? The answer is clearly no.

This unprecedented period is characterized by a broad and deep disregard for the freedoms that Americans have long taken for granted: foremost among them, freedom of speech. In his new book, The Authoritarian Moment, Ben Shapiro writes: “Our culture wars aren’t about anything so mundane as marriage, policing, or even abor-
tion. Our culture wars are about a simple question: Can we agree that freedom of speech is more important than freedom from offense? Can we hire, work with, and break bread with people who may differ on the nature of the good life, but agree on the individual freedoms that come along with being an American? The question will remain open for some time.

Despite endless warnings from the media about Trump's and Republicans' supposed authoritarian instincts, we are suffocating in an environment of left-wing oppression. As Shapiro, the wildly popular founder of the Daily Wire, puts it, “Trump might have authoritarian tendencies, but he did not wield authoritarian power.” The left does, and The Authoritarian Moment is a comprehensive guidebook to its vast suppression machine. Shapiro explains how “the authoritarian Left has successfully pursued a three-step strategy to effectuate their takeover of the major institutions in our society. The first step: winning the emotional argument. The second step: renormalizing the institutions. The third step: locking all the doors.”

On the first step—winning the argument—Shapiro is particularly enlightening. He leans heavily on the work of French physicist Serge Galam to answer the bedeviling question: How does a small minority of leftist radicals wield such outsize power over the larger population? Here's how. The uncompromising minority presents a binary choice to the larger group it seeks to coopt: Join us in our righteous campaign, or be thought of as backward bigots who side with the enemy. The targeted party inevitably kneels before the moral blackmailers, petrified of the consequences should they resist. This works across the board. Not only is it how Squad member Repre-

sentative Cori Bush got Biden to endorse her eviction moratorium, it's how the revolutionary left got Coca-Cola, for example, to train employees to be “less white” in the name of inclusion.

Institution after institution has caved before this strategy and thereby been renormalized. Shapiro goes into great detail, offering separate analyses of the renormalizations happening in government, media, science, education, and the workplace. Given that he wrote the book during the COVID-19 pandemic, his section on the renormalization of science lands with a fierce immediacy.

He identifies two dominant elements in the current corruption of science: the Ultracrepidarian Problem and the Bleedover Effect. “The Ultracrepidarian Problem widens the boundaries of science beyond the applicable,” Shapiro writes. This happened, for example, when scientists came out en masse proclaiming racism a public-health emergency. By contrast, “the Bleedover Effect narrows the boundaries of science to the ‘acceptable.’” Such was the case when, in 2018, the American Medical Association renounced any definition of sex that referred to “immutable biological traits identifiable by or before birth.” Doctors, according to the renormalized AMA, “assign” sex. (Shapiro is never caught wanting for real-world events to bolster his arguments.)

Through the power and reach of American institutions, the radical left has managed to foist its oppressive agenda on the country in what seems like an overnight coup. But it merely feels as if it happened overnight. Shapiro lays out a valuable account of the revolutionary groundwork, a century in the making, that went into the establishment of the new dispensation. The American left, in his telling, has historically oscillated between dreams of utopia and a hunger for revolution. “But the two impulses are in conflict,” he writes. It was Barack Obama who finally tied the two together “by embracing the power of government—and acting as a community organizer within the system itself, declaring himself the revolutionary representative of the dispossessed, empowered with the levers of the state in order to destroy and reconstitute the system itself, declaring himself the revolutionary representative of the dispossessed, empowered with the levers of the state in order to destroy and reconstitute the state on their behalf.” This insight perhaps best explains Joe Biden's clunky “Build Back Better” slogan. What the revolution has destroyed, the Biden administration will rebuild—all utopian lines.

Shapiro is famous, in part, for a rapid-fire speaking style that enables him to pack years of analysis into a single TV appearance. He manages something analogous in The Authoritarian Moment, con-
Starr’s Report

Religious Liberty in Crisis: Exercising Your Faith in an Age of Uncertainty
By Ken Starr
Encounter Books, 215 pages

Reviewed by Tal Fortgang

Ken Starr—evidently age has so mellowed the former judge, solicitor general, and special prosecutor that he now uses his nickname rather than the more formal “Kenneth W.”—has turned his attention to a subject especially suitable for a minister’s son. In his new book, Religious Liberty in Crisis, Starr reviews dozens of high-profile cases that have shaped our current religious-freedom landscape. He writes in the manner not of the college president he used to be but more as a man of faith, guiding his flock of lay readers toward “understanding their rights” and standing up to threats posed by “laws and regulations.” Understanding the Court’s interpretation of the First Amendment, Starr’s theory goes, is crucial for religious citizens who feel the need to stand up against the encroaching forces of politics.

Starr is therefore aligning himself with a defensive, liberty-focused tradition that views the secularist state as the primary threat to freedoms of religion and conscience—and he believes that a primary value of public policy ought to be respecting each citizen’s liberty to pursue his own conception of virtue. The best way to accomplish this aim is to declare sacred space off-limits from the exercise of political power. In addition to autonomy, Starr champions both equality—among religious sects and between the religious and the secular—and accommodation, which demands that the state tailor its policies to make religious life viable.

In recent years, some conservatives have shot past this tradition. They insist that seeking accommodation is basically a loser’s game. In their eyes, state power is not the problem but the solution, so long as it is wielded unabashedly by the right people with the right ends in mind. Led in spirit by Adrian Vermeule, a Harvard Law School professor and “integralist” Catholic who seeks to subordinate state power to church leadership, the new vanguard insists that trying to carve out space to worship freely will never work. What we actually need to save our souls is to infuse American government with more explicitly religious (even sectarian) ideas. Politics must be purposefully oriented to explicitly religious ends if we are to stand any chance of fending off the secularist barbarian hordes at the gates of your local public library.

Vermeule puts the contradiction bluntly in a provocative essay published in the Atlantic last year: “The central aim of the constitutional order is to promote good rule, not to ‘protect liberty’ as an end in itself. Constraints on power are good only derivatively, insofar as they contribute to the common good.” This idea effectively pooh-poohs Starr’s solution to religious Americans’ challenges, which is, quite simply, to put “constraints on government.”

Starr is a constitutionalist who...
believes that our law (especially after Reconstruction) is meant to protect individuals against a zealous state, and to limit the power of would-be tyrants and oppressors. He is wary of substantive orientations within the law that may privilege one denomination’s idea of the highest good over another’s.

By contrast, today’s statist conservatives urge the use of more, not less, government power to beat back the forces of secularization and libertinism. Vermeule says that “strong rule in the interest of attaining the common good,” which he has equated on several occasions with Catholic social doctrine, “is entirely legitimate.” Practically speaking, both the Starr and Vermeule factions would celebrate recent defeats handed to state governments that used the pandemic as an excuse to bully churches and synagogues. But Starr would likely conclude from these episodes that the system is working, while the Vermeullians would conclude that our politics have become morally denuded. The fact that emergency appeals to the courts were even necessary is, for Vermeule and his ilk, a sign that people of faith need to be more proactive in taking the reins of power.

In light of this radical trend, Starr’s review of First Amendment jurisprudence seems almost quaint. The bulk of Religious Liberty in Crisis is dedicated to Supreme Court cases from the 20th century, when America found its cherished traditions of religious freedom under assault from activist courts that might have thought it an impermissible establishment of religion if you walked into the White House and remarked, “God, what a lovely building.” As Starr shows, we have made great strides in the campaign to restore the establishment and free-exercise clauses of the First Amendment to meanings befitting our Constitution’s Framers—most of whom invoked God frequently, supported religion in the public square, and were perfectly content to allow states to establish churches. Religious believers have good reason to trust now, for the first time in decades, that the courts will vindicate their rights even as democratically elected leaders are likely to become more hostile to faith and practice. In some sense, then, religious liberty is not it crisis at all.

But an unspoken crisis does lurk in the emerging chasm between Starr and Vermeule. Perhaps it is a weakness of the book, or perhaps the moment just passed Starr by in 2021 speed, but his review avoids this percolating conflict. Do we fight for more carve-outs and protections, using the Constitution as our deed of title showing that we are entitled to perform our strange rituals and foreign incantations as we see fit? Or do we eschew autonomy by trying to infuse the state with a religious purpose in a way that would split “religious liberty” in half, elevating its first half and forsaking its second?

Vermeule’s edgy young fan base may not like it much, but our tradition here in the United States is one of religious freedom—not religious coercion, not secularism, and certainly not fanatical anti-establishmentarianism, but freedom. Against the backdrop of this American tradition, trendy flirtations with nominally pro-religious authoritarianism look much more like a passing fad—not to mention far less conservative.

It is in our DNA and our destiny to be pluralistic. We have little choice. Unlike the nations of Europe, we did not emerge from one family with a single binding sense of purpose, or a single binding understanding of the divine. From the outset, Americans have been a people of diverse faiths, behaviors, and conceptions of the highest good. Deeply ingrained in our understanding of the role of religion in society is the idea that a piety coerced is not piety at all. Deeply ingrained in our understanding of the role of religion in society is the idea that a piety coerced is no piety at all.

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James Madison expressed this view most eloquently in his 1785 “Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments.” Ensuring the conscience rights of all required recognizing that “religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence.” This is so not least of all because government dictates tend to require uniformity, and such dictates applied to substantive visions of the highest good “will de-
stroys that moderation and harmony which the forbearance of our laws to intermeddle with Religion has produced among its several sects.”

Starr’s opposition on the right trusts their own to imbue the institutions of power with more overtly religious substance. They are increasingly drawing on the conduct of central and eastern European countries more religiously and culturally uniform than ours to prove that it can be done. But by glossing over our emergent tradition of pluralistic liberty, they seek an America that never was and never could be. In that, they are every bit as utopian as the progressives they despise.

Yet one of the Vermeullian critiques is valid. A free society cannot last without constraints on its citizens, each of whom has the power to use his freedoms to corrode the bonds of trust and goodwill that keep a republic afloat. This, too, is part of our tradition: Madison himself wrote in Federalist 55 that the Constitution would not function without “sufficient virtue among men for self-government,” because without virtue “nothing less than the chains of despotism can restrain them from destroying and devouring one another.” President John Adams connected this insight to religion more explicitly: “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People,” he wrote in 1798. “It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”

Virtue has always been necessary to a free society, and religion has always been thought the best guarantor of virtue. The accommodation principle Starr details speaks to that peculiar element of American public life. Even in 1970, in the thick of the Supreme Court’s assaults on the establishment clause, an 8–1 majority agreed that tax breaks for religious institutions were constitutionally permissible because states were within their rights to consider religious groups “beneficial and stabilizing influences in community life.” Our tradition recognizes, in theory and in law, that religion has an elevated status among nongovernmental organizations for its complementarity with a free republic.

Is there a path forward for Americans who believe that religion, with the virtue it cultivates, is vital to a free society but who still see liberty as the state’s proper goal? Starr is convinced that there is, and his subtitle—“Exercising Your Faith in an Age of Uncertainty”—suggests how. Wearing our religious beliefs as badges of honor is a way of attacking the problem at its core. Religious interests come to be regarded as marginal forces in politics and law because they are misunderstood as veneers of bigotry and underestimated as cultural forces. Americans have come to rely on the Supreme Court, a counter-majoritarian institution, to defend what was once a freedom all Americans valued. We are more worried than ever that the people, left to their own votes and representatives, would crush religious liberty and religious believers. But we need not be resigned to it being this way.

Starr, with his Christian love leaping off the page, demonstrates through his demeanor and his chosen anecdotes that the best thing we can do for religious liberty is to give our religions a good name. Being firm in standing up for tradition—not merely asserting its existence but making the case for its role in human flourishing—makes the case for religious liberty better than any coercive measure could. Religious Americans are happier, on average, than their secular counterparts, sowing the seeds for a renaissance of traditionalism among a new generation already showing signs of renewed interest in religious orthodoxy.

Happy warriors like Starr can reveal to a demoralized society that belief in something beyond ourselves makes human life whole. But belief in anything beyond human autonomy will continue to be a hard sell as long as religious people resign themselves to extremes of cultural passivity or audacious and un-American political proactivity. Weakness invites the popular perception that religious people do not quite take themselves seriously and will fold when confronted with the social-justice left’s idolatrous liturgy. Resorting to coercion is doomed to fail. But we can cling tightly to our rites, and through the flourishing they yield, we can show our neighbors that traditional faiths make for great nations of wise and understanding people who live lives of meaning and mission in a society that craves both.
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Sally Rooney’s Women

Beautiful World Where Are You
By Sally Rooney
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 353 pages

Reviewed by Clare McHugh

The Irish novelist Sally Rooney turned 30 in February. For the past several years she has enjoyed the kind of worldwide success no writer with serious literary intentions could ever have banked on. Her hotly anticipated third book, Beautiful World, Where Are You, has just been published, following the bestselling Normal People from 2018 and her debut, Conversations with Friends, the previous year. In 2020, Hulu ran the BBC’s glossy 12-part dramatic series based on Normal People, which vastly expanded the audience for Rooney’s careful, mournful fiction. Some breathless commentators have likened her to Jane Austen, able to portray the dynamics of small groups in a way that exposes the hypocrisy and pretentiousness of society. But that misses the mark. Rooney’s prose is not particularly humorous, nor does she rely on gentle irony. She writes about the way the reader has to wade through a great deal of tedious self-hatred and self-involvement as expressed by the brainy, introverted, privileged young white women she writes about. They invite men to hurt them, they’re ambivalent about ambition, they are obsessed with who is a victim and who an oppressor. Where is the gumption, the initiative, and self-confidence so prized by women who came of age in the last third of the 20th century? Scant on the ground in Rooney’s latest offering, as in her previous novels. Beautiful World, Where Are You is a colder, more difficult novel to engage with than her others—a deliberate response, one senses, to the author’s unlikely celebrity. Rooney appears to be resisting becoming a publishing commodity, a commercially minded, reliably reader-pleasing writer of popular fiction. Instead, with this new book, she challenges her audience to follow as she examines, often at clinical remove, the fates of two fairly unlikeable female protagonists. Only the lively concluding chapters make the novel truly worthwhile.

One of the two main characters, Alice, is a successful young Irish woman who has been paid ridiculous sums of money for her work by an American publishing house. Unlike Rooney herself—recently married to her longtime partner—Alice is single, and she experiences a mental breakdown in the wake of her success. As the book begins, she is out of the hospital and has rented a large, isolated house by the sea in the west of Ireland. There, she meets, via the dating app Tinder, a local man named Felix, who has a decidedly nonglamorous job as a packer in an Amazon-like shipping center.

Meanwhile, back in Dublin, Alice’s best friend from college, Eileen, is drifting through life as a poorly paid assistant editor at a literary magazine. As she approaches the age of 30, Eileen feels in grave doubt about her chances for happiness. She has recently broken up with one boyfriend, Aidan, and pines after Simon, a man five years older, to whom she has felt attracted since her early teenage years.

Having worked successfully in the first person (Conversations with Friends) and the close third (Normal People), Rooney here narrates the action in alternating chapters and voices. To start, we witness the awkward first date between Alice and Felix, related as if by an impassive video camera. The next chapter is an email Alice writes to Eileen describing her state of mind, her current political musings, and, then, very briefly, her meeting with Felix. He “absolutely despised me,” she recounts. Chapter 3 goes back to the camera perspective, as Eileen works at the office and thinks about her ex, Aidan, and her crush, Simon, followed by a fourth chapter in which Eileen writes an email to Alice about her fears of civilization collapsing, the futility of political action, and the trauma of catching sight of Aidan by chance in the street. Eileen con-
Some Like It Dark

On film noir

By Terry Teachout

WHEN Billy Wilder made Double Indemnity, his 1944 version of James M. Cain’s novella about an insurance salesman who conspires with his lover to murder her unwitting husband and collect his accident insurance, he had no idea he was giving birth to a new cinematic genre. The film was a box-office hit, in part because of the cynical candor with which Wilder (who co-wrote the taut screenplay with the novelist Raymond Chandler) portrayed the lead character, a basically decent man who succumbs to the temptation to do evil and whose choice sends him hurtling down the path to his own violent death.

Soon after, other Hollywood directors began making films directly influenced by Double Indemnity. In Fritz Lang’s Scarlet Street (1945), Jacques Tourneur’s Out of the Past (1947), Robert Siodmak’s The Killers (1946), and André de Toth’s Pitfall (1948), among countless others, the outlines of a new category of film took shape, one in which handsome but hapless fall guys (most notably Burt Lancaster and Robert Mitchum) lose their heads over scheming women and pay with their lives.

It was not, however, initially recognized as such here in America, where Hollywood categorized these types of movies as “crime pictures,” “crime thrillers,” and “murder stories.” What’s more, such films were regarded by the few critics who bothered to pay attention to them as inferior successors to the gangster and detective movies of the ’30s. James Agee dismissed Double Indemnity as “essentially cheap” in the Nation, while Manny Farber called it “slick, slight, arty, and visually synthetic” in the New Republic.

The phrase “film noir,” which is now universally used to identify the genre Wilder incepted, was coined in 1946 by a French critic named Nino Frank; it entered the lexicon in the 1950s only after Frank’s countrymen at small publications such as Cahiers du Cinéma became the most influential writers in the world on the subject of movies. Even despite their cachet, the term “film noir” first appeared in the New York Times decades later, in 1973.

One reason that film noir was so slow to emerge as a recognized genre is that many films now considered classics of the style depart from the now-familiar noir model in significant ways. Nicholas Ray’s In a Lonely Place (1950), for example, is the story of a psychologically disturbed screenwriter (played by Humphrey Bogart) whose fits of
near-uncontrollable rage make it impossible for him to have a relationship with a woman and cause him to be suspected of a murder. John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) is a "caper" movie whose subject is the planning and execution of a failed jewel robbery. Today, the term "film noir" is commonly used to describe any crime film made in the '40s and '50s that has an urban setting, mostly takes place at night, and is photographed in a high-contrast style.

This is the wide-ranging approach taken by Eddie Muller, who hosts TCM's *Noir Alley*, a weekly series of noir and noir-like films. Mueller has just published a revised and expanded edition of *Dark City: The Lost World of Film Noir*, the profusely illustrated 1998 book in which he surveyed the genre.* Muller writes in a cheerful, often jokey way, an odd tack to take with so essentially grim a genre ("Where Spade pitted his antagonists against each other...Marlowe wearily prescribed himself another shot of wry"). But he is both knowledgeable and thorough, and *Dark City* is a useful introductory guide, one that helps to explain the most puzzling thing about film noir: Why was it so popular—and why has it remained popular?

**DOUBLE INDEMNITY** was released in a year when wartime moviegoers were flocking to sentimental dramas like *Going My Way*, frivolous farces like *Arsenic and Old Lace*, nostalgic musicals like *Meet Me in St. Louis*, and heroic combat movies like *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*. They sought escape, and Hollywood gave it to them—but they were also well aware of the wearying realities of wartime. Roger Ebert once described film noir as "the most

American film genre, because no society could have created a world so filled with doom, fate, fear, and betrayal unless it were essentially "naive and optimistic." Perhaps, but wartime America was also a place where Ebert's allegedly naive and optimistic wives betrayed their soldier-husbands often enough that the phrase "Dear John" was coined to describe the letters in which they asked for divorces.

As for Billy Wilder, a Jew who had fled Hitler's Germany, he needed no one to tell him of the savagery with which human beings could behave. Not that **Double Indemnity** is in any way a political movie—it is a purely personal tale of faithless love—but it is still hard to imagine its having been made even a few years earlier.

Conversely, some early films noir, including Edward Dmytryk's *Crossfire* (1947) and Abraham Polonsky's *Force of Evil* (1948), were made by left-wing writers and directors (some of whom were card-carrying Communists) whose purpose was to suggest that in capitalist America, the deck was always stacked. But the socially conscious films noir are blatantly obvious in their political purpose and heavy-handed to the occasional point of unintended comedy.

The films noir that remain watchable, by contrast, are the ones that concentrate on the dark crosscurrents of middle-class American life and revolve around the problem of individual responsibility. To be sure, the tacit assumption is that the anonymous cities in which films noir are set are so corrupt that upright individual conduct is all but impossible. Nevertheless, every classic film noir hinges on a crucial moral choice made by the protagonist, as Walter Neff, Fred MacMurray's character, admits to the audience in his voice-over narration for **Double Indemnity**: "I'm not trying to whitewash myself," he says about the crime he commits out of love, lust, and greed. "I fought it...only maybe I didn't fight it hard enough."

It's easy to see how such films would have appealed to Americans who had come home from a war in which many of them had not only been but committed acts of violence (and in which some of them had additionally been unfaithful to their wives). Most of them had entered the war as young, unformed men, and their overseas experiences prematurely ripped the innocence out of them, thus predisposing them to take an interest in movies that were honest about the prevalence of evil in the world.

It is no coincidence that so many film-noir protagonists are veterans: That fact, even when it is mentioned only in passing, is often crucial to the plots of the films in which it figures. Take, for instance, *Pitfall*,

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* Running Press, 259 pages.

**Commentary**
in which Dick Powell plays John Forbes, a vet who spent the war doing clerical work in a stateside camp, after which he returned to his family in suburban Los Angeles and his job as a claims adjuster for an insurance company. Though John loves his wife and son, he is bored with the humdrum routine of his life and embarrassed about his lackluster war record, thus making him a prime candidate for film-noir trouble.

It comes when he is assigned to repossess a motorboat from Mona (Lizabeth Scott), the blond girlfriend of an embezzler who is in jail for having bought it with stolen money as a present. At once sexually alluring and unselfconsciously friendly, Mona has caught the eye of a brutish private investigator (Raymond Burr) who is determined to have her at any cost. She falls instead for John, who knows better but chooses not to resist her charms after she describes his life to him in a way that is less cruel than sad, even embarrassing:

You're a little man with a briefcase. You go to work every morning and you do as you're told. Today they told you to go to such and such an address and pick up some stolen goods. So here you are….If you were a nice guy, you'd cry a little bit with me, and feel sorry for a girl whose first engagement ring was given to her by a man stupid enough to embezzle, and stupid enough to get caught.

It is, of course, the wrong choice, and the result—two bullet-riddled corpses and a marriage in tatters—is a horrifically typical film-noir denouement, as characteristic as that of Double Indemnity.

The initial vogue of film noir was short-lived. After the end of the Korean War and the coming of postwar peace and prosperity, moviegoers were less disposed toward bleak, fatalistic screen entertainments.

The initial vogue of film noir was short-lived. After the end of the Korean War and the coming of postwar peace and prosperity, moviegoers were less disposed toward bleak, fatalistic screen entertainments. In 1953, the first year of Dwight Eisenhower's presidency, the top-grossing film in America was White Christmas and the top-rated TV series was I Love Lucy. By the late '50s, noir had all but died out, with Orson Welles's Touch of Evil (1958), generally regarded as the last "classic" film noir, providing an overripe swan song.

It was then that French directors started making their own films noir, a few of which, such as Jean-Luc Godard's Breathless and François Truffaut's Shoot the Piano Player (both 1960), were directly comparable in quality to the American films that had been their inspiration. But not until 1974 did Hollywood attempt to revive noir, though the results were worth the wait: Roman Polanski's Chinatown, at once a knowing homage to the genre and a film evocative of the mounting disillusion of Vietnam-era America, was no mere costume piece but one of the greatest American films of the postwar era.

Chinatown was followed by a string of "neo-noir" films, some of which, like Lawrence Kasdan's Body Heat (1981), were far too obviously derivative of the original films noir on which they were too clearly based. Others, however, most notably Arthur Penn's Night Moves (1975), Joel and Ethan Coen's Blood Simple (1984), Robert Benton's Twilight (1998), and Stephen Frears's The Grifters (1990), found new ways to ring the familiar changes of fall guys, tempting women, wrong moral choices, and shadowy cinematography.

Whether neo-noir will flourish in the age of streaming remains to be seen. But the originals have not lost their power both to divert and—at their best—disturb. They are moral tales about the thinness of the ice on which human decency rests, told in a way so stylish that it remains fresh decades after the fact, and it seems probable that there will always be an audience for such stories of what can happen to well-meaning men and women who choose the wrong path at the wrong time.
attached to their television. He and his roommates—all males between 22 and 29—were about to become a Nielsen Family. They were about to help determine the national television ratings for a key demographic group. Their specific viewing habits were about to be extrapolated and treated as representative of their cohort as a whole, which was interesting to me, because I had a new comedy about to premiere.

“I will pay you $15,000 apiece,” I said, “to watch my show.”

In my mind. I said those words in my mind. Because somewhere in my dim memory I vaguely recalled signing a paper promising not to do that very thing, swearing some kind of contractual oath not to game the system, when I signed my studio contract. And though I would have dearly loved getting a celebratory and unequivocal call the next day from the studio and network research departments, I kept the exchange on the ethical high ground and no money was exchanged. I simply asked him to pretty-please watch my show and, if at all possible, to leave the television off until just before my show came on and to turn it off immediately after the studio logo appears in the end credits. What I’m going for, I told him, is a noticeable bump.

I don’t know if it worked, though I have to admit that the series had a pretty impressive debut, especially in the coveted male 18–35 demographic. But this kind of thing just adds fuel to the rising chorus of voices in the television business saying that the Nielsen monopoly on audience measurement needs to end.

The Video Advertising Group is a trade organization made up of cable-television producers and old-style broadcasters that has accused Nielsen of undercounting the broadcast and cable audiences by nearly 6 percent. They have forced the company to undergo an audit of its methods and measurements, but the position of the companies is clear: They insist their audience share is being undercounted. They are convinced more people are watching their shows than Nielsen is measuring and that rather than being in the middle of an alarming audience free fall, cable and broadcasting audiences are robust and growing. They are looking at the Nielsen data like my dog, absolutely certain there is a cube of cheese in there somewhere.

The streaming services have it a lot easier. Nielsen attempts to measure their audiences, too, though it’s more for bragging rights than anything else. Netflix and Hulu and their competitors have only one key metric to report—new and renewing subscribers—and those are numbers they announce quarterly, on earnings calls with investors. Those are the only “ratings” that count.

But their utter disdain for the grubby cable-and-broadcasting audience measurement must be galling to those ad-supported businesses. Netflix, for instance, regularly releases what it calls “datedotes”—a little bit of data, a little bit anecdote, get it?—filled with pointless factoids about the “Most Popular Show on Thursday Among Teens” and the “Most Talked-About Limited Series” on the service. None of these “datedotes” have any real measurements attached to them. It’s just the rich, cool streaming kids making the broadcast and cable nerds feel clumsy and broke.

What the Video Advertising Group wants, it says, is more “accuracy.” If that were true—and it isn’t—they would be the only part of the entertainment industry universe that actually wants to know, down to the person, how many people are watching its products. Accuracy in this arena serves no one’s interests. They don’t want it right. They want it 6 percent higher.

The studio that produces the television show wants a large audience so it can charge the network a little more the following year. The network wants a large audience so it can charge the advertisers more for each 30-second spot. The advertising agencies want to report that their brilliant creative messages have been seen by an enormous audience, which will allow them to keep their clients and attract new ones. The consumer-products companies that buy time on television want to report up the chain that consumer awareness is high, the marketing team is on top of it, and that everyone deserves a raise.

So at the end of the current battle between Nielsen and the television business, the result will be a kind of affirmative action for Old Television. After some adjustments here and there to its methods and some statistical tweaks, the recalculated audience for cable and broadcast television will be found to be 5 percent higher than previously measured.

Not 6 percent, because you have to leave something on the table for later. You always want to have a treat in your pocket, as all dog owners know.
MY DOG HAS a rubber toy that has a hollow core, and what you’re supposed to do is fill the core with peanut butter or cheese and watch as she nudges it and bounces it and tries to get at the treat inside. Mostly, though, she just stares at it with a totally baffled expression.

It’s the same expression that people in the television business have when they’re staring at the Nielsen ratings. Somewhere buried in the cross-tabs and demographic breakdowns is an argument for declaring their television project a hit. They just have to figure out how to spin the numbers.

“These are very good numbers,” someone from the studio research department told me a few years ago on the morning after a show I was working on had its second-season premiere. “You’re up in the 25-to-54 range, you hold your lead in, and year-over-year you’re showing growth for the network.”

I had been staring at the ratings breakdown for nearly an hour when he called, and I couldn’t quite figure out how the show had performed. He saved me a lot of agita.

Or would have, had someone else from the network research department not called moments later to say: “You had a soft debut. You did okay. The low-middle range of okay. We’re concerned.”

That morning’s whiplash was produced by the audience-measurement data of the Nielsen Media Research company. Through a variety of complicated audience-measurement tools—and, I suggest, a certain amount of witch-doctoring—the Nielsen ratings come out each day to tell the advertisers, networks, shareholders, and executives what America watched the previous evening.

There are robot telephone polls, live calls, viewing diaries, set-top boxes, and of course the famous “Nielsen Families”—households that allow Nielsen to measure directly what they’re watching—all collecting information about specific audiences, which is then extrapolated into a snapshot entitled “What Happened Last Night.” If it sounds a lot like political polling, that’s because it is, including the gripes about methodology and “skewing” and “sample size” that the previous night’s losers always engage in. If you could sit in the writers’ room of a show that had a disastrous night in the ratings and close your eyes, you wouldn’t know if you were among coastal elite electric-car-driving Hollywood liberals or MAGA-hat-wearing red-staters. Everyone, it turns out, hates the pollsters.

“Have you even met a Nielsen Family?” We ask one another as we digest the ratings. And of course no one has.

One day, though, I did.

I had just finished a book tour event at a bookstore in a university town. As I was gathering up my stuff and wondering where the closest drink could be found, a young man approached me and told me that he and his roommates had been asked by Nielsen to have a “ratings box”.

Rob Long has been the executive producer of six TV series.
Ben & Jerry’s Bad Taste

The ice cream maker’s intent to ban sales and operations of its Israeli affiliate in the “Occupied Palestinian Territories” is based on lies and bad faith toward Israel.

While Ben & Jerry’s board also wants to boycott the State of Israel entirely, it was stopped by its owner Unilever. Either way, the false claim that Israel occupies “Palestinian territories” is a malicious slander—attempting to delegitimize the Jewish state—itself an anti-Semitic act.

What are the facts?

Ben & Jerry’s has informed its Israeli affiliate that it will cease their relationship because the affiliate refuses to stop selling its frozen confections in the disputed territories of Judea and Samaria (aka the West Bank). According to international law and the Oslo Accords, signed by the Palestinian Liberation Organization, Israelis have every right to create communities in these territories. Yet Ben & Jerry’s board chair doesn’t only object to Israel’s presence in its ancient homeland, she also considers Israel’s very existence a “catastrophe”—and she supports Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) actions, which many U.S. states have outlawed.

What are the “Occupied Palestinian Territories”? While radical groups use this phrase, it has no legal basis. Rather, it is a figment of anti-Israel propaganda. In fact, “occupation” is an international legal term originating from Article 42 of the Hague Convention—long-standing statements of the laws of war and war crimes. Occupation is defined under a category titled, “Military Authority Over the Territory of the Hostile State.” In other words, an “occupation” can only be on the territory of another state. However, Judea and Samaria have never belonged to any state, and the Palestinians have never had a state or sovereignty anywhere. This term clearly does not apply.

Who owns Judea and Samaria (the West Bank)? Many believe Palestinian Arabs should have independence on their own land, and Israel has attempted for decades to negotiate a peace with them supporting this principle. However, both international law and treaties legally support the claims of the Jewish people to their ancient homeland of Judea and Samaria. From the Balfour Declaration in 1917 to the 1922 Mandate for Palestine of the League of Nations—later adopted by the United Nations—these territories were designated as the “national home” for the Jewish people. The only other state to have control of this land was Jordan, which illegally conquered it during Israel’s War of Independence, but whom Israel drove out following Jordan’s unsuccessful invasion of Israel in 1967. While millions of Americans and Israelis support Palestinian independence, no international laws currently grant the Palestinians legal rights to a state.

What did Israel and the Palestinians agree on in the Oslo Accords? In 1993, with extensions in 1995, Israel and the Palestinians agreed on a framework for negotiating a peace treaty based on “the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination.” This gave both Israel and the Palestinians various rights to govern and administer parts of Judea and Samaria. The agreement gives Israel complete security and administrative control over about 60% of these territories—where very few Palestinians live—including the right to create Jewish communities there. While Israel has made numerous offers of land for peace to the Palestinians—including most of Judea and Samaria—the Palestinians have turned down every offer. Since 2014, they have refused to negotiate further.

Why is Ben & Jerry’s boycott of Israel considered anti-Semitic? While many Americans support efforts to create a Palestinian state, the BDS movement does not support a “two-state solution.” In fact, BDS co-founder Omar Barghouti has freely admitted, “We oppose a Jewish state in any part of Palestine.” Ben & Jerry’s board chair, Anuradha Mittal, also opposes Israel’s existence, referring to Israel’s 1948 birth as the “Nakba”—Arabic for “catastrophe.” Mittal is currently under IRS investigation for funneling large sums of Ben and Jerry’s grant money to her own rabidly anti-Israel Oakland Foundation—of which she is the only paid employee. According to the globally accepted IHRA definition of anti-Semitism, denial of the Jewish people’s rights to self-determination is inherently anti-Semitic. No wonder BDS is currently outlawed by 35 U.S. states, many of which have initiated legal actions against Ben & Jerry’s and its owner Unilever.

Ben & Jerry’s directors should be held to account. Their boycott of Jewish communities in Israel’s biblical homeland is anti-Semitic, anti-Israel and anti-peace. Until the boycott ends, how could any supporter of the Jewish people—any supporter of Israel—enjoy the bitter taste of Ben & Jerry’s ice cream . . . or the purchase of any of 1,000-plus consumer products sold by its behemoth, UK-based owner Unilever?

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