I was ridiculed for predicting the Dow Jones Average would reach 36,000. It just did. Here’s why I was right.

IF YOU BET ON THE AMERICAN ECONOMY, YOU WIN

By JAMES K. GLASSMAN
It’s not too late to save a life in Israel this year.

For more than 90 years, American donors have provided vehicles, training, and supplies to Israel’s national paramedic and Red Cross service, equipping them to treat the sick and injured under the most difficult circumstances and to save lives.

In fact, this past year Magen David Adom’s 30,000 EMTs and paramedics have been on the front lines in the fight against coronavirus while also contending with terrorist and rocket attacks, riots, car accidents, and other threats to Israeli lives.

If you want to make a real difference in Israel, no other organization has a greater impact on its people than Magen David Adom.

Make an end-of-year donation at afmda.org/saving-lives-2021
WHAT IS THE difference between bad policy and dangerous policy? I think that no matter where you are on the political or ideological spectrum, there is a significant difference. Bad policy is policy you dislike and disagree with, but which falls within comprehensible or acceptable parameters. You, liberal or conservative, believe the policy you think is bad will have adverse consequences—but you also think those consequences can be reversed with better choices once the public sees and experiences the mistakes that have arisen from it. That is, in fact, what politics is about.

The infrastructure bill that passed the Senate in August and the House in November—in both cases with crucial if limited Republican support—is an example of bad but not dangerous policy, in my view. It throws money around like confetti at a terrible time for money-throwing, when inflation is on the rise. But there have been bills like this before, and there will be bills like this again, especially when it comes to spending on public works.

In 1987, Ronald Reagan actually vetoed a highway bill that passed a newly Democratic-dominated Senate (Republicans had had the majority for six years after Reagan's blowout 1980 election until the 1986 midterms) on the grounds of its profligacy. Then he had his veto overridden—a terrible blow to a president's credibility—when 13 GOP senators decided they wanted taxpayer money spread around their states more than they wanted to hew to principle and restraint.

To show how bipartisan, or even nonpartisan, the love of infrastructure spending can be, consider this sentence from an inaugural address: “We will build new roads and highways and bridges and airports and tunnels and railways all across our wonderful nation...rebuilding our country with American hands and American labor.” That was Donald Trump, 2017. There was a huge fight in Trumpland during the transition period after the 2016 election when populists in his camp, led by Steve Bannon, wanted Trump to seize on infrastructure as a way of fulfilling his populist message—spending in America on America.

It would have been an interesting and unconventional gambit that might have thrown Democrats on the defensive. It would have given them a Hobson's choice between supporting a president they wanted to run out of town or voting against a big-spending, big-government plan right out of their most luxuriant dreams. But Trump, for whatever reason, didn't go for it. Had he gone for it, most of those who voted against the 2021 infrastructure bill would have voted in the affirmative.

It would have been bad policy then, too. But understandable within the classic boundaries of the American seesaw between the Democrats and the Republicans.

So what is dangerous policy? Committing $2 trillion to $4 trillion in entirely new spending in what would be the most radical expansion of the size and reach of the federal government in six decades—that is dangerous. Creating giant new child-care entitlements and thereby empowering the public-education establishment that has become the national object lesson in bureaucratic self-dealing—dangerous. The semi-permanent return of national welfare 25 years after it was ended by Bill Clinton—dangerous. Direct federal construction of supposedly affordable housing that will only inflate housing prices and make homes less affordable—dangerous.

The passage of the infrastructure bill with Republican support (19 senators, 13 members of the House) is just an example of bad policy becoming law in response to normal political pressures. It would have been better if it hadn’t happened, but it’s something we know we can live with. The intrusions on and alterations in ordinary American life in the proposed “Build Back Better” bill is dangerous policy, and we will be heading down an irreversible path into a bleaker American future if (and I don’t think this will happen) it passes.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JAMES K. GLASSMAN</td>
<td>If You Bet on the American Economy, You Win</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAY TAKEYH</td>
<td>The Coup Against Democracy That Wasn’t</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANNE BAYEFSKY</td>
<td>An Important Blow Against UN Anti-Semitism</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JOSEPH EPSTEIN</td>
<td>Books Do Furnish a Civilization</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOAH ROTHMAN</td>
<td>The Left’s Crusade Against the 1990s</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Politics & Ideas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abe Greenwald</td>
<td>Among the Elect \n\textit{Woke Racism}, by John McWhorter</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eli Lake</td>
<td>The Resistance Liar \n\textit{Midnight in Washington}, by Adam Schiff</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles Fain Lehman</td>
<td>It Is a Tree of Life \n\textit{Squirrel Hill}, by Mark Oppenheimer</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naomi Schaefer Riley</td>
<td>Poverty Isn’t the Problem \n\textit{Invisible Child}, by Andrea Elliott</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry Teachout</td>
<td>Do We Really Need Movie Theaters? \nDid we ever?</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Monthly Commentaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Editor’s Commentary</th>
<th>Washington Commentary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>John Podhoretz</td>
<td>Matthew Continetti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bad vs. Dangerous</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Letters</td>
<td>The Reddening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>on the October issue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Christine Rosen</td>
<td>Meir Y. Soloveichik</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parental Guidance Not Suggested</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hanukkah Unbound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tech Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>James B. Meigs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tapping the Brakes on Self-Driving Cars</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hollywood Commentary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rob Long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Judenrein Movie Museum</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To the Editor:
I COMMEND Bret Stephens for his excellent article about America’s place in the world after the Afghanistan debacle (“The Post-Pax-Americana World,” October). It’s comprehensive in its scope, insightful in its analysis, and it makes a good-faith attempt to present counterarguments.

As the article points out, the U.S. is confronted with many geopolitical challenges, and there’s no shortage of global actors who are happy to undermine America’s global influence. As the article also states, however, another danger is the false race narrative that erodes national self-confidence in the foundational values that undergird America. This is perhaps the greatest danger in that it delegitimizes the country’s ongoing evolution toward fully realizing those values.

John Murphy
Muntinlupa, Philippines

To the Editor:
BRET STEPHENS’S article on the meaning of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan makes the case that President Biden is incompetent. But what if Biden and his administration are ferociously competent?

If the goal is to reduce America internationally, it is hard to imagine a policy that would be more effective and yet still within the bounds of feasibility. The grotesque public abandonment of friends and fellow citizens to barbarians in Afghanistan (not to mention a violent, wide-open southern border in flagrant violation of U.S. law, wild spending, and even wilder spending proposals, inflation, and a looming energy crisis) may seem like bungling but might not be.

By contrast, the Biden administration has shown itself capable of bold, imaginative, and worrisome actions when facing those they are dedicated to defeating—such as parents who dare criticize the local school board for teaching an overtly racist ideology to their children.

Why would the president wish to reduce the U.S. in this way? The Biden administration has been very indulgent of leftists, for whom America is simply the worst place on earth. The vague, corrosive slogan of “systemic racism” means to convince us that everything, everywhere, always in this country is so loathsome that we need a complete makeover.

Kevin Jon Williams
Wynnewood, Pennsylvania

To the Editor:
The outstanding essay about Joe Biden’s foreign-policy faklessness reminds me of why I subscribe to Commentary. Bret Stephens captures my own sentiments about the role of the U.S. in the world and the real consequences of our shameful defeat and withdrawal from Afghanistan. It is likely that China will act to take Taiwan sooner than in six years. Beijing might even do so while Biden is in office, betting on the chance that the U.S. will not respond. Vladimir

December 2021
Putin is doubtless making similar calculations.

What’s lost on society, largely because of a lack of reporting by legacy media, is that the ridiculous spending decisions coming out of Washington, both what has been incurred and what is on the table in Congress, will crowd out military spending needed to preserve world stability. These are frightening times.

PHILIP G. BOYLE
Sarasota, Florida

To the Editor:

BRET STEPHENS establishes a parallel between the foreign-policy impulses of Donald Trump and Barack Obama, seeing both presidents as contributing to American retreat.

It is worth considering some differences between the two on foreign policy. Trump, perhaps to appeal to his base, proposed to focus on building up American industry, which he assessed to have been damaged by unfair foreign competition. Nevertheless, he achieved something new and bold in the “Abraham Accords.” Obama’s foreign retreat was not driven by hopes of reviving the American industrial base. In fact, he was guided by an interest in drawing the U.S. closer to Iran and creating some distance between our country and Israel.

As Stephens mentions, many actors in the international scene are working to dislodge America as the dominant global power. The problem is that this goal is shared by the educational and economic elites of this country. This is accomplished at home by destroying the cultural, religious, and emotional links that American citizens once enjoyed as a matter of course.

RUTH WARAT
Plantation, Florida

Commentary

December 2021 Vol. 152 : No. 5

John Podhoretz, Editor
Abe Greenwald, Executive Editor
Noah Rothman, Associate Editor
Christine Rosen, Senior Writer

Bret Stephens, Contributing Editor
Terry Teachout, Critic-at-Large

Carol Moskot, Publisher
Kejda Gjermani, Digital Publisher
Malkie Beck, Publishing Associate

Ilya Leyzerzon, Business Director
Stephanie Roberts, Director of Operations

Board of Directors
Michael J. Leffell, Chairman
Daniel R. Benson, Paul J. Isaac,
Liz Lange, Jay P. Lefkowitz,
Steven Price, Gary L. Rosenthal,
Michael W. Schwartz, Dan Senor

COVER ILLUSTRATION: ALEX NABAUM/THE ISPOT

To send us a letter to the editor: letters@commentary.org
We will edit letters for length and content.
To make a tax-deductible donation: donate@commentary.org
For advertising inquiries: advertising@commentary.org
For customer service: service@commentary.org

Commentary (ISSN 0010-2601) is published monthly (except for a combined July/August issue) by Commentary, Inc., a 501(c)(3) organization. Editorial and business offices: 561 Seventh Avenue, 16th Floor, New York, NY, 10018. Telephone: (212) 891-1400. Fax: (212) 891-6700. Customer Service: service@commentary.org or (212) 891-1400. Subscriptions: visit www.commentary.org/subscribe or call (212) 891-1400 for current rates. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and additional mailing offices. Subscribers will receive electronic announcements of forthcoming issues. Single copy: U.S. is $5.95; Canada is $7.00. All back issues are available in electronic form at commentary.org. Postmaster: Send address changes to Commentary, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ, 07834. Unsolicited manuscripts must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Letters intended for publication may be edited. Indexed in Reader’s Guide, Book Review Digest, and elsewhere. U.S. Newsstand and Distribution by COMAG Marketing Group, 155 Village Blvd, Princeton, NJ, 08540. Printed in the USA. Commentary was established in 1945 by the American Jewish Committee, which was the magazine’s publisher through 2006 and continues to support its role as an independent journal of thought and opinion. Copyright ©2021 by Commentary, Inc., all rights reserved under International and Pan American Copyright Conventions.
On Renewable Energy

To the Editor:

James B. Meigs offered an honest and fair take on “renewable energy” and how we got here policy-wise (“The ‘Renewable’ Fallacy and Why I Blame Jimmy Carter,” October). As a resident of California, I can personally attest to the high cost of so-called renewable energy. I installed rooftop solar panels in an attempt to mitigate the exorbitant price of electricity in California.

A pragmatic approach to clean energy should include nuclear power. More research money needs to be spent to enable the development of newer and safer approaches to nuclear-reactor design and other technical aspects of nuclear power. Wind and solar energy are extremely expensive, and they very probably do not reduce carbon emissions as much as their proponents claim. Europe is facing extreme electricity costs (except nuclear France) while the Continent now demonizes natural gas as a fossil fuel. Europe seems to be paying a great deal for very little in the way of actual carbon-emissions reductions. The U.S. also looks as if it’s heading down this path. There’s now talk of eliminating natural gas in new housing in California, which will burden middle- and lower-income Californians in a painful way. It’s hard to think of a more counterproductive policy than making electricity nearly unaffordable while eliminating natural gas, which is one of the few relatively inexpensive sources for heating and cooking.

Dave Wagner
San Marcos, California

To the Editor:

In reading James B. Meigs’s article on our history regarding renewable energy, I was reminded that nuclear power will become renewable once we figure out how to leach uranium from seawater in useful quantities. There’s enough uranium in the ocean to last the entire globe for 10,000 years. This approach, not solar, will be the end of our dependence on fossil fuels.

Scott Henderson
Chelmsford, Massachusetts

America and the Jews

To the Editor:

Josef Joffe’s article on Jews and America calls to mind a dilemma faced by one of my professors at university back in the ’80s (“American Jews: A Threat Report,” October). As much as he loved his job, his family was enduring anti-Semitic bigotry in his northern New Jersey community. Eventually, the professor decided to take a job in Atlanta, Georgia. He told us that in Georgia, he at least knew where he stood.

At this moment in time, with the unrecognized Democrat Party, a media bent on manipulating language, corporate America kowtowing to a woke culture, it’s not unlikely that our reliance on a stable situation for our people will be seriously challenged.

I’m not quite packing my bags, but my wife and I are applying for Israeli citizenship. At least there, we know where we would stand.

Stanley Scher
Riverdale, New York

Texas and Roe

To the Editor:

I appreciated Adam White’s truly outstanding analysis of the new abortion law in Texas (“Abortion’s Texas Twist,” October). White’s insight into and explanation of qui tam lawsuits rounded out (for this lawyer) how future arguments may shape up. I’ve long believed that Roe was as vacuous and result-oriented a decision as this article makes abundantly clear. Thank you for a great read.

Jim Rosenberger
Seattle, Washington
When it comes to the concerns of American parents about the education of their children, the mainstream media have lost the plot. Story after story paints a portrait of American parents as an extremist, potentially violent mob driven by conspiracy theories and threatening the lives of this country’s hard-working school-board members and professional educators.

There are 63 million Americans with children under the age of 18.

This has all come to a head in recent months with the reporting on and commentary about local school boards, which the media have largely portrayed as under assault from hordes of unhinged, ignorant, racist parents. As that paragon of good behavior, CNN’s Jeffrey Toobin, said recently, “it’s really important to remember why we are talking about school boards at all: because it’s about white supremacy, and that’s on the rise in the Republican Party.”

Several factors have contributed to the hysterical tone. For over a year during the pandemic, mainstream outlets reflexively parroted teachers’-union talking points about the need to keep schools shuttered. While repeatedly and dutifully transcribing the wisdom of American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten, for example, few journalists managed to report on the views of the many parents and educators who disagreed with the union approach to school closures. Parents who protested draconian mask mandates were dismissed as right-wing kooks, and stories about mask mandates often failed to mention the evidence, including from countries in Europe and states such as Florida, that masking young children was not universally accepted as necessary.

Meanwhile, debates over how to teach students about race, which have been roiling for years in some school districts, did not appear on the mainstream media’s radar until parents began showing up in larger and larger numbers to school-board meetings to protest what they view as ideologically motivated curricula. The “racial reckoning” that elite gatekeepers at media institutions have enthusiastically embraced for themselves made it impossible for them to treat with appropriate professional skepticism some of the more outrageous claims made by critical-race-theory advocates at K–12 schools. Indeed, the media’s favorite claim—the source of many sanctimonious “fact checks” by mainstream news outlets—is that CRT isn’t even being taught in schools, that it is merely a figment of the right-wing imagination. It’s an astonishing act of misdirection; sure, it’s not the theory itself that’s being taught, but the ideas that emanate from it certainly are.

And so, as frustrations and concerns grew, parents began showing up in larger numbers to public meetings where they could air them—and demanding the resignation of school-board members in places like San Francisco that are hardly bastions of conservatism. Rather than report on those grievances and the responses from officials, the media largely told a
single story: Parents posed a real and present danger to school administrators and school boards. “Violent school board meetings and threats toward school board members over these issues have caused dozens of board leaders to quit their positions,” Minnesota Public Radio reported breathlessly in October. And yet, they could not describe a single violent incident that had occurred.

Washington Post columnist Philip Bump was also on the case, and he identified the real culprit as ...Fox News. “Fox News helped amplify (if not create) a furor at school board meetings several months ago,” he wrote, likening the spontaneous uprising of parents across the country to a conspiratorial cabal, “carefully cultivated and tended” in the manner of the Tea Party movement. Astounding political blunders made by Democratic candidates themselves were cast in these terms. After Virginia gubernatorial candidate Terry McAuliffe said during a debate that parents should have no say in what schools taught, Bump still found a way to blame Fox News: “McAuliffe's comment about parents, which seems fairly obviously not to have been helpful, allowed the right and Fox News to center that frustration on his race in particular.”

Similarly, a widely reported dust-up in June between a father and law-enforcement officials who removed him from a school-board meeting in Loudoun County, Virginia, prompted a spate of articles in mainstream outlets decrying the supposed increase in violence.

Basic reporting would have revealed the devil in the details.

Just before the father's arrest, during a discussion of potential dangers posed by transgender policies, Loudoun County Public Schools superintendent Scott Ziegler claimed, “We don't have any record of assaults occurring in our restrooms.” The father was there, in fact, to question the school board about his daughter, who had been (so a court has found) sexually assaulted by a boy wearing a skirt, who identified as “gender-fluid,” in the girls' restroom at her school. Loudoun County then transferred the offender to another school, where it appears he committed a second sexual assault.

The Daily Wire, a conservative outlet, broke the story, which the mainstream media ignored for days, most likely because the story of a gender-fluid boy sodomizing a 14-year-old girl did not fit their narrative about the need for more inclusive bathroom policies. Those who did comment on the rape ended up engaging in embarrassing intellectual contortions to keep the left's narrative on message: New York Times columnist Michelle Goldberg described the case as “the Right's Big Lie about a sexual assault in Virginia.” Having suddenly developed an allergy to the word rape, Goldberg instead made sure to mention that the victim had previously had consensual sexual encounters with the boy. She went on to describe the forced sodomy with more anodyne language: The boy "expected sex and refused to accept the girl's refusal." Goldberg dismissed parents' concerns about how the school board handled the rape as “a moral panic.”

The Big Lie here isn't being told by Fox News. It's being told by mainstream media and Michelle Goldberg. A girl was raped. Then her father was arrested and portrayed as a terrorist for protesting the actions of school-board officials who lied and covered up that rape. Those same officials put other children at risk by transferring the rapist to another school where he apparently committed an additional sexual assault.

The National School Board Association cited the arrest of the father in a September letter to Attorney General Merrick Garland as evidence that school-board officials were “under an immediate threat.” The association demanded, and the Attorney General agreed, to devote federal law-enforcement resources, including investigation by the FBI, to the supposed problem.

The media are clearly and almost openly working to assist Democrats by deliberately ignoring a clear difference of opinion about how much power parents should have over what their children see and learn in school. Democrats (and their allies in the educational bureaucracy) have long assumed that parents should have no say and no ability to opt out of having their children read sexually explicit or violent books, for example, or instruction that casts some kids and their parents as racial oppressors and others as victims. Indeed, the argument embraced by the Democratic educational establishment—and now the media—is that all such texts should be presumed useful so long as they advance the agenda of greater “tolerance” that the establishment has deemed necessary.

Parents are no longer acquiescing to this form of ideological paternalism. If you’re wondering why ordinary Americans increasingly report mistrust in their institutions, from the media to the government, this is why. If you tell citizens who raise legitimate objections to what is happening to their children in schools that their pushback will be viewed as violence, or that they are merely pawns of Fox News, or that they are simply too ignorant to know what's best for their children, they know you are attempting to stifle debate, not encourage it—to demonize them rather than cover them.

This is the self-destructive behavior of people who act as if they have already legitimately won a culture war—when, in fact, that war has only just begun.
A S VOTERS IN Virginia and New Jersey went to the polls on November 2, President Joe Biden was in Scotland at a climate-change conference. Before returning to Washington, he talked to the press. Biden predicted victory for the Democratic candidates in both races and cautioned reporters from drawing connections between his approval ratings, the fate of his agenda, and the electoral strength of his party. “I don’t believe, and I’ve not seen any evidence that whether or not I am doing well or poorly, whether or not I’ve got my agenda passed or not is going to have any real impact on winning or losing,” he said.

The evidence was waiting for him when he returned to the United States early the next morning. Not only did Republican Glenn Youngkin defeat Democrat Terry McAuliffe to become Virginia’s governor elect; Republican candidates for both lieutenant governor and state attorney general won, too, and Republicans flipped the state’s House of Delegates. In New Jersey, Republican gubernatorial candidate Jack Ciattarelli closed an eight-point gap in the Real Clear Politics average of polls to tie incumbent Democrat Phil Murphy. (The race has yet to be called as I write this.) One anonymous Democratic congressman from the Garden State described the results succinctly in an email to the Politico Playbook: “F—ing disaster down ballot and way too close at the top.”

What explained the disaster? Liberals on CNN and MSNBC were quick to blame McAuliffe’s defeat on gullible voters and a racist backlash. They said that Youngkin bamboozled Virginia parents into thinking that elementary- and secondary-school children were being indoctrinated in far-left “critical race theory,” or “CRT.” They said that Youngkin’s call to ban CRT, and to allow parents to opt their children out of sexually explicit curricular materials, was code for animus toward black people. Their emphasis on education mirrored the culture warriors of the right, who argued that Youngkin’s appeals to parents and opposition to government mask and vaccine mandates put him over the top. Both the woke left and the MAGA right saw Youngkin as a paladin of Donald Trump: a populist outsider who, unlike the 45th president, came with a smile instead of a snarl, and who wore sporty fleeces instead of long red ties.

This was a misreading. Education was high on the list of issues critical to voters in the exit poll, but it was not the most important one. The economy mattered more. Nor was the election a referendum on Trump and Trumpism. Youngkin accepted President Trump’s endorsement, and often pandered to MAGA voters, but he neither campaigned with Trump nor mentioned him on the trail. Indeed, during his closing rally in Loudoun County, the president Youngkin mentioned was not Donald Trump but George W. Bush.

It was McAuliffe who wanted to turn Youngkin into another Don Junior. He failed because the current president weighs more heavily on voters’ minds than the last one. Biden’s denial of culpability for Virginia and New Jersey was, like so many things he says, completely wrong. He is the reason for the shift toward Republicans

Matthew Continetti is a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

Commentary 9
A president’s job-approval rating is a handy indicator of party performance. Biden’s approval has been flashing red for months. The October Gallup poll had him at 42 percent approval, in the danger zone where fellow partisans fear to tread. More noteworthy than the level of Biden’s support has been its sudden decline. Gallup says that the difference between Biden’s first quarter and third-quarter job-approval ratings is the largest on record. This hemorrhaging of goodwill began in the summer when the Delta strain of the coronavirus spread across the country. It accelerated in late August during the Taliban’s conquest of Afghanistan and America’s botched and dishonorable withdrawal from its 20-year-long war. But the bad feelings did not end there. Even as Delta and Afghanistan faded from the headlines, the public’s sour disposition toward Biden remained.

Why? Because behind the ravages of Delta and the embarrassments in Afghanistan was an equally pressing, longer lasting, and more widely felt crisis. This was inflation. The rise in prices affects every American who buys groceries and gasoline. The supply shortages reach every American who orders goods online, purchases a car, visits a restaurant, or rents an apartment. As Mark Shields likes to say, when the economy is the issue, it is the only issue. And presidents will be held responsible for the economy no matter the true extent of their influence over it. As inflation has eroded purchasing power and wage gains, Biden’s job approval has plummeted. Republicans held a nine-point advantage over Democrats, their largest since 2014, on ‘keeping America prosperous’ in the October Gallup poll. Their advantage on the economy was 18 points in the October NBC poll.

Virginia is not exempt from these trends. Biden’s approval rating was underwater in the commonwealth on Election Day. And voters named the economy, which is a stand-in for inflation, as the top issue in both the CNN exit poll and the Fox News Voter Analysis. Education came in a distant second in the former and third in the latter. And Youngkin won voters who prioritized the economy by double digits.

True, his advantage on education was even greater. But the issue ranked a distant second in importance. And just as the “economy” encompasses inflation, “education” refers to more than CRT. Not every voter may know what critical race theory is. Yet every parent in Virginia had to deal with school closures and remote learning for over a year during the pandemic. And they still have to cope with draconian quarantine policies whenever one of their children comes into close contact with a person who tests positive for COVID.

It was therefore nothing less than political malpractice for McAuliffe to choose teachers’-union boss Randi Weingarten, who did more than anyone to keep kids out of school, to make his closing argument to Democrats in Fairfax County on election eve. One of the central questions of the campaign was the role parents should play in the education of their children. McAuliffe made it clear that he sided with neither parents nor children but with teachers’-unions.

Big mistake. Not as big, though, as portraying Glenn Youngkin as the second coming of Donald Trump. McAuliffe’s campaign was utterly defensive. He had no positive agenda for a second non-consecutive term as governor. His rhetoric was filled with (often dishonest) warnings that Youngkin was a Trump in sheep’s clothing. In his commercials and campaign tactics, McAuliffe aimed at connecting Youngkin to the worst events of the Trump presidency. The strategy reached an absurdist endpoint when the Lincoln Project planted in front of a Youngkin bus a diverse group of activists dressed as white nationalists and carrying tiki torches like those associated with the 2017 Charlottesville riot. The hoax was exposed in minutes. It backfired. As did McAuliffe’s endless evocations of President Trump.

For starters, Trump’s favorable rating in the exit poll was about the same as Biden’s job approval. Youngkin outperformed Trump on favorability, just as he outperformed the former president electorally. Biden’s approval rating loomed larger than Trump’s favorability. Forty-eight percent of voters told the CNN exit poll that Biden was not a factor in their vote for governor. But 28 percent said they voted to oppose Biden. And, unsurprisingly, those voters broke almost unanimously for Youngkin.

The result in Virginia was a 12-point swing toward Republicans since 2020 and an 11-point swing since the last governor’s race in 2017. The election brought home the fact that, for now at least, Trump is receding into the past. Biden dominates the present, for better or, thanks to incompetence and inflation, mostly worse. And Youngkin? He’s the future.
THE OLYMPIC TORCH relay is one of the most celebrated of international spectacles. Kindled in Greece, the torch is borne by runners around the world, ultimately ending up at the host city for the games, where it is used to bring the Olympic flame into being. The torch is seen as a link between ages ancient and modern, between Olympia and the Olympic stadium, a drama spectacularly staged and internationally embraced.

And it was entirely the invention of the Nazis, created as a means of linking ancient Greece to Germany’s Aryan identity, and to celebrate the dawn of the Third Reich.

The evil origin of the Olympic torch is often elided, but it is important to review the facts. Though many modern Olympics had already been held, it was at the Berlin 1936 games that the torch relay first took place, concocted by chief Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels’s group of propagandists. Thus USA Today reports:

“There was no torch relay like this in ancient times,” [said] David Clay Large, a history professor, historian of modern Germany and author of Nazi Games: The 1936 Berlin Olympics....The relay came into being as part of the political propaganda used by the Nazis to promote their cause in conjunction with the Olympics. And it has stuck around ever since.”

While Adolf Hitler was initially uninterested in the Games, which had been awarded to Berlin before he rose to power, Goebbels persuaded him that the event could provide a powerful publicity tool. Hitler ordered Nazi party researchers to find links between the ancient Greeks and the Aryan race.

During the relay, onlookers in Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Austria, and Czechoslovakia were encouraged to yell “Heil Hitler” as the flame went by. “That route was significant too,” Large added. “Within a couple of years the Wehrmacht would essentially take the same route in reverse as they marched through Europe.”

With the advent of Hanukkah, when Jews recall the cultural clash between Hellenism and Judaism in the second century B.C.E., we would do well to ponder the contrast between the fire of the Olympics and the flames that illumine the menorah.

While the Olympic torch was a piece of Nazi propaganda, the Olympic flame that it lit was ancient in origin and did feature in the original Olympics millennia ago. A basin filled with fire was, for the Hellenists, a tribute to Prometheus’s theft of fire from the gods. According to Greek myth, Prometheus and Epimetheus were charged by the gods with creating man. Zeus gave man fire, but then Prometheus taught humankind to sacrifice animal bones to the gods and keep the best

Meir Y. Soloveichik is the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City and the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.
meat for themselves. Furious at the deception, Zeus took fire away, but Prometheus hid it in a reed and bore it away from Olympus. In response, Zeus chained Prometheus to a rock and sentenced him to having his liver pecked out by an eagle over and over.

In *Prometheus Bound*, Aeschylus inveighs against the injustice of the gods, as typified by Zeus’s conduct. And the injustice is precisely the point, which is why Aeschylus’s work is so different from anything in the Hebraic canon. As the great Talmudist and literary scholar Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein once noted, the closest biblical book to Aeschylus’s *Prometheus* is the tale of Job, in which the main character pondered suffering in the face of God’s providence.

Rabbi Lichtenstein writes that though he does eloquently protest, “Job knows his place in relation to the Holy One.” Job speaks of a good God whose ways we cannot often understand. By contrast, Aeschylus emphasizes a conflict “between power and justice.” Rabbi Lichtenstein adds, “The tragedy is that although these two values should work together in harmony, they are in fact in conflict here and ultimately it is power which prevails.”

This is the metaphysical view expressed by the Promethean myth. And indeed, it is the centrality of power over justice that was being celebrated as the Nazis held aloft the Olympic flame as the purported *Übermenschen* of their age.

It is therefore fascinating that in Talmudic tales, we find a rabbinic story about the origins of fire that is a mirror image of the Prometheus story. Adam and Eve are banished from the garden and enter a dark and unredeemed world. But in a great act of love, the Talmud tells us, God took two stones and instructed Adam in the art of creating fire. Whereas the Greeks see in fire the story of a rebellion against the gods, and a world where power prevails, fire for Jews epitomizes God’s mercy, as well the existence of the divine-human partnership.

It is with this in mind that the central ritual of Hanukkah today—the kindling of several small flames in commemoration of a Menorah that burned in the Temple for eight miraculous nights—must be understood. The story of the flask of oil has been mocked by the Nazis held aloft the Olympic flame as the purported *Übermenschen* of their age.

The right response to what happened in Germany, Scalia reflected, “can be achieved only by acknowledging, and passing on to our children, the existence of absolute, uncompromising standards of human conduct. Mankind has traditionally derived such standards from religion; and the West has derived them from and through the Jews.”

This, in the end, is what Hanukkah is all about, and the holiday therefore speaks particularly to us today. Throughout much of the West, biblical faith has waned profoundly. No one still sacrifices to Zeus, but given the approach of many to the sanctity of human life and the worshipful embrace of nature, the prospect of a repaganized Europe is all too real a possibility. In a season marked all too often by holiday kitsch, it is worth remembering the clash of cultures that brought Hanukkah into being—and the profound message that the menorah’s flames have to teach us.
Guided by our Jewish values and history, HIAS helps refugees build new lives.

Make a year-end gift now.

Help Us Resettle Afghan Refugees

HIAS.org
Tapping the Brakes on Self-Driving Cars

JAMES B. MEIGS

IN 1956, GM unveiled a high-tech concept car it called the Firebird II. If ever there was a Car of the Future, this was it. The sleek four-seater was powered by a jet engine, featured a titanium body, and sported a central tail fin that would have done the Batmobile proud. But the car’s most futuristic feature wasn’t visible on the outside: The Firebird II could drive itself, or at least, GM promised, such a car would be able to navigate unassisted in the not-so-distant future.

GM released a slick promotional film showing how an all-American family would take a road trip in the Firebird II in the halcyon era two decades hence: After a brief radio conversation with the “control tower,” Dad steers the car into the “high-speed safety lane” and is instructed to take his hands off the wheel. “You’re now under automatic control,” the tower informs him. Dad stows away the steering wheel and lights up a cigar while his wife and two kids enjoy cold drinks from the onboard dispenser. Their jet-powered car serenely steers itself down an almost empty highway, passing desert landscapes and elegant buildings straight out of The Jetsons.

Of course, it’s easy to make fun of old, overly optimistic predictions about the future. But over the past decade, enthusiasm for self-driving vehicles has come back with a vengeance. Only this time the concept is at least technologically plausible. And it is backed by serious money. Some of the world’s richest companies—including Google, Tesla, Uber, and Apple, not to mention Ford, Toyota, and, yes, GM—have sunk billions into the autonomous-vehicle (AV) race. Today, some 60 companies are road testing AVs and associated technology in California alone.

So should we all expect our cars to start chauffeuring us around within the next few years? Not so fast. Despite all that research and investment, the dawn of the AV era keeps getting pushed into the misty techno-future.

There are many factors that drive technological change. One is the state of engineering: What is technologically feasible? But there’s another, often under-appreciated factor: What is desirable? How much change do consumers really want? In the 1950s, futurists predicted that in 50 years few people would choose to cook; they would just thaw out precooked

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.
meals. And no one would want clothes made of wool or cotton; synthetics were so much more practical! Those futurists would have been shocked to see 21st-century hipsters knitting sweaters, or modern dads still cooking meat over hot coals like their Paleolithic ancestors did. Convenience and efficiency aren't everything, it turns out.

So it is with self-driving cars. The push for autonomous vehicles isn't coming from actual car owners. It's coming from carmakers, green-transportation advocates, and, especially, Big Tech. In fact, the vast majority of drivers don't want to have anything to do with robot cars. According to a 2021 survey by AAA, 86 percent of respondents said they would be “afraid to ride in an automated vehicle.” So if car buyers don't want self-driving cars, why are automotive and tech firms pouring so much money into the field? Oh, they have their reasons.

For automakers it’s about money of course. Right now, their revenues mostly come from selling us new cars. But since a typical car now lasts about 12 years, manufacturers don’t get too many bites at that apple. Carmakers would rather get paid for the time you spend in a vehicle, much the way Uber makes money on every ride you take. That’s why Ford is testing AVs in partnership with Lyft, Toyota has partnered with Uber, and so on.

These companies envision a future in which fewer people drive their own cars. Instead, they see a world in which we opt to ride in fleets of autonomous, all-electric cars and vans that are almost constantly in motion, shuttling paying passengers from place to place. Green-transportation advocates also like the idea of replacing owner-driven cars with shared vehicles, which would effectively turn the automobile into a decentralized form of public transportation.

For Big Tech, it’s all about the data. “If the car is doing the driving, then you’re free to spend more time online, shopping or working,” former Car and Driver editor Eddie Alterman told me. “They want to colonize more and more of your time so they can harvest that data.” Ultimately, that data might be more valuable than the vehicle you travel in. Instead of being a bastion of privacy and independence, the car then becomes yet another digital panopticon we willingly inhabit. “The key metaphor for the car has always been liberty, the freedom to go wherever you want,” Alterman says. “But that’s becoming less and less true.”

In many ways, we are already giving up some of our individual agency when we drive. New cars increasingly come with digital tech meant to make driving easier and safer—lane-departure warnings, smart cruise control, collision avoidance, and the like. The most advanced of these systems, such as Tesla’s so-called Autopilot, can almost entirely take over the task of driving in predictable environments such as major highways. Drivers must keep one hand on the wheel and are told to stay alert to hazards. But, not surprisingly, studies show most drivers quickly lose focus when Autopilot is engaged.

AV boosters say such driver-aid systems will soon evolve into genuine full autonomy. Currently, when semiautonomous systems like Tesla’s encounter confusing traffic patterns or bad visibility, they are programmed to shut down and hand control of the vehicle back to the (hopefully wide-awake) driver. Higher levels of automation—what the Society of Automotive Engineers calls Levels 4 and 5—would mean the vehicle could drive itself under most or all conditions. (“Level 5 means you can go to sleep in the back,” one expert says.) A Level 4 AV known as Cruise, a joint venture between Honda and GM, is currently being tested in San Francisco. (The test rules do require that a “safety operator” ride shotgun, ready to flip the kill switch if needed.)

But experts I’ve talked with think the transition to full autonomy is less of an incremental progression than a leap into the unknown. “It’s not primarily a technical problem,” Alterman says. “It’s a psychological problem.” Today, we accept that human drivers are fallible. While we don’t excuse accidents caused by driver error, our society has come to tolerate them as a cost of our car-oriented lifestyle.

We see machines differently. Riding in a fully autonomous car means putting our faith in hardware and algorithms we don’t fully understand. That requires a much higher level of trust. ‘Riding in an AV is more like getting on an airplane,’ former Car and Driver editor Eddie Alterman says. ‘You know that you are not in control.’

Commentary
know that you are not in control.” But at least in an airplane, you know the pilots care deeply about keeping you—and themselves—alive. A robot driver, on the other hand, doesn’t have self-awareness or a sense of self-preservation. It’s not morally concerned if something goes wrong. That means a fatal accident caused by a bad algorithm or a shoddy sensor strikes us as somehow scarier than one caused by a drowsy or reckless driver. In theory, if every car on American roads were autonomous, highway accidents would plummet. But until we reach that supposed Shangri-La, every death caused by AV technology will loom especially large in the public’s awareness. “Until we have had zero AV fatalities for a very long time, people aren’t going to trust this technology,” Alterman says.

And it’s not as if AV companies have ironed out the technical bugs. Teslas operating on Autopilot crash with alarming regularity. Real-world AV tests have been plagued with accidents. Most are minor fender benders. (Since AVs tend to slam on the brakes at the first hint of a problem, they often get rear-ended by human drivers.) But in 2018, a pedestrian was struck and killed by an autonomous Uber vehicle undergoing testing in Phoenix. (The “safety driver” didn’t even look up from her phone.) Perhaps frustrated by slow progress and legal headaches, Uber last year sold off its AV division at a “fire-sale” price. And Uber isn’t the only company to learn that teaching computers to drive cars is much harder than they expected.

The biggest challenge AV systems face is predicting the behavior of all those pesky humans clogging up towns and cities—other drivers, cyclists, jaywalkers. No AV firm has yet demonstrated a fail-safe ability to navigate chaotic city streets. Until humans and robots learn to get along better, this challenge could delay the full roll-out of AVs for years, perhaps indefinitely.

“The bottom line is, unless you have all autonomous vehicles, you really can’t have any autonomous vehicles,” Alterman says. For some AV advocates, that’s an argument for banning human-driven cars from some urban centers, or for setting up autonomous-only lanes on highways (like that “safety lane” in the 1956 GM film). In this view, there’s nothing wrong with algorithmically controlled vehicles. It’s those unpredictable humans who make all the trouble. “There is always a danger that tech companies will convince cities to re-make their streets in terms of infrastructure that benefits AVs and not pedestrians,” Nicole Gelinas, of the Manhattan Institute, warns. More likely, we will see AVs first used as people movers in closed environments, such as college or corporate campuses. Perhaps AV vans will cruise protected routes in some cities, augmenting bus or light-rail services. And AV trucks might operate in a handful of dedicated highway lanes in a few years. Those sorts of narrow applications could have economic and environmental benefits.

But Americans, in all their anarchic, freedom-loving glory, are unlikely to submit to having too many streets or highways reserved for our robot overlords. A world prioritized for AVs would be one in which we’ve lost the independence and spontaneity of driving a car—not to mention walking or biking—on our own streets. “Your personal autonomy will have been sacrificed to the machines,” Alterman says. Technology can do a lot to make our world more convenient and safer. But we—as individuals—have to remain in charge. 
IF YOU BET ON THE AMERICAN ECONOMY, YOU WIN

By JAMES K. GLASSMAN

FLUSH with enthusiasm, which is his way, my friend and colleague Kevin Hassett barged into my office at the American Enterprise Institute 24 years ago to tell me that he had a solution to what economists called the “equity-premium puzzle.” I had no idea what he was talking about.

Kevin’s notion, which I eventually came to understand and embrace, was the germ of our article in the Wall Street Journal on March 3, 1998, with the headline, “Are Stocks Overvalued? Not a Chance.” You need to understand the context. The years 1995 to 1998 were the best in U.S. stock-market history. On December 5, 1996, Alan Greenspan, the chairman of the Federal Reserve, had warned of “irrational exuberance” in a speech at AEI’s annual dinner. On that day, the Dow closed at 6,437, having doubled in four years. On the day our article was published in the Journal, it was 8,782. We argued that a truly rational level

for the Dow was 35,000. A year and a half later, with the market still climbing, we made a few adjustments and published a book called Dow 36,000.

Now it’s happened. Right after the stock market opened on November 1, the Dow hit 36,009. The index has returned 457 percent since the book came out. In other words, if you had put $10,000 into the 30 stocks of the index on the day of publication and reinvested the dividends in more shares of those stocks, your final investment would have grown to $55,700.

Dow 36,000 was widely mocked for its title. “Even in those heady days,” wrote Zachary Karabell recently in the New York Times, “forecasting a near-quadrupling of the index appeared naïve at best and ridiculous at worst.” In fact, our prediction was modest. History shows that putting your money in the U.S. stock market and keeping it there over a long period—at least 10 years and, better, 20 or more—has almost always been a good bet. Five years before Dow 36,000 was published, Jeremy Siegel, a Wharton economist, developed a dataset of stock and bond performance going back nearly 200 years and concluded, “It is very significant that stocks, in contrast to bonds or bills, have never delivered to investors a negative real return over periods lasting 17 years or more.” Since 1909, there have been only four rolling 10-year periods (that is, 1909–1918, 1910–1919, etc.) when the stock market has lost value.

There are two reasons the market has done so well. The first is a paradox. People are scared of stocks. Because they think stocks are riskier than they really are, investors price them to yield a high return (a point I’ll explain further). The second reason is easier to understand. Stocks do well because the U.S. economy does well. An investment in the stock market—especially the broad market that the Dow Jones Industrial Average has represented since Charles Dow first compiled it in 1896—is an expression of faith in American business and in public policies that, despite many false steps, generally allow people and markets room to innovate and thrive.

What’s still missing in those policies is encouragement for much broader stock ownership. According to Gallup, when Dow 36,000 was published, 60 percent of U.S. households owned stocks, stock mutual funds, or 401(k) plans with stock investments. Last summer, the figure was 56 percent. That nearly half of Americans have no stake in the nation’s best companies is a crime.

The story of Anne Scheiber shows what they have missed.

In the early days of 1995, a man named Benjamin Clark dialed up Norman Lamm, an Orthodox rabbi who was president of Yeshiva University in New York City, and asked for a meeting. The two got together a few days later. Clark, an attorney, told Rabbi Lamm that his client, who had died weeks before, had bequeathed a huge amount of money to Yeshiva. It turned out to be $22 million, the second-largest gift in the university’s history.

Clark’s client, Anne Scheiber, was not particularly religious and had no connection at all to Yeshiva (she had gone there once for a lecture). Lamm had never heard of her. Scheiber gave the majority of her estate to Yeshiva’s Stern College for Women, Clark said, because “it is the only college for women in America that is under Jewish auspices.” More precisely, the bequest was an act of revenge. Scheiber believed that, as a Jew and a woman, she had been prevented from advancing by her employer, the Internal Revenue Service, and she wanted other women, especially Jewish women, to get an education that would give them the knowledge and confidence to succeed. She also wanted to deny the IRS any bit of the wealth she had acquired in the stock market by refusing to take capital gains and then donating her assets at death to a university.

Upon her retirement in 1944, Scheiber invested her entire life savings—$5,000—in stocks such as Schering-Plough (a venerable pharmaceutical manufacturer), Allied Chemical, and Coca-Cola, and turned the investment into $22 million.

Although she had a law degree, Scheiber never earned more than $3,150 a year, the equivalent of less than $50,000 today. She had a tiny, $450-a-month apartment with paint chipping from the walls. Her passport, said an article in the Observer, the Stern College newspaper, “had a single stamp from a European vacation she took 60 years ago.” Anne Scheiber accumulated her riches by investing a small amount of money in the stock market when she retired as an IRS auditor at the age of 50 and leaving the shares to grow in her account.

She turned $5,000 into $22 million in part because she was a good stock picker who lived to be...
101, but her real talent was fortitude. She bought and held the shares she owned no matter what happened around her: World War II, Korea, the Kennedy assassination, stagflation, the Nixon resignation, and the horror of October 19, 1987, when the market lost 22.6 percent in a single day.

MARKETS HAVE always been and will always be forced to contend with adversity. Since the publication of *Dow 36,000*, we've been through 9/11, the worst economic decline since the Great Depression, and the worst pandemic in a century. The Dow fell by more than half between its peak in the fall of 2007 and its nadir in the spring of 2009. When investors recognized the full impact of COVID-19, the Dow dropped 10,000 points in a month. In either of those cases, if you had sold your stocks, you would have missed massive recoveries.

Over the past century or so, stocks have returned an average of about 11 percent a year including dividends—while U.S. Treasury bonds have returned about 5.5 percent. The difference between the two is called the “equity risk premium”—that is, the extra amount that stocks pay investors to compensate for the difference in risk between stocks and bonds. In 1985, economists Rajnish Mehra and Edward Prescott (the latter won the Nobel Prize in 2004) formulated what they called a “puzzle” in a widely cited article in the *Journal of Monetary Economics*. Their puzzle: In fact, stocks, as Siegel and others showed, are no more risky than bonds, so why should they pay investors more? It would be like paying even money if heads turns up on a coin flip—but 2-to-1 if tails comes up. As Princeton economist Burton Malkiel wrote in a review of our book, “the extra 5.5 percentage points from owning stocks over bonds...is unjustified.”

But where did we go wrong? For starters, we should have had more respect for the judgment of the market: that is, the millions of people around the world who decide to buy and sell shares based on what they perceive to be the prospects for thousands of businesses. These investors demand double-digit returns for the risks they are taking, and it is an act of hubris to second-guess them.

The risks that investors perceive are not necessarily the risks that economists define. Financial risk is generally measured by examining variations in returns. If a company’s shares bounce up and down in extreme ways, those shares are considered risky. Even in a diversified portfolio, such as the 30 blue-chip stocks of the Dow, returns are volatile in the short term but remarkably stable over long periods—and, after accounting for inflation, they are actually less volatile than Treasury bonds. But investors don’t react according to their long-term perceptions. They can’t help but be affected by current or recent shocks like 9/11 or COVID-19. And there is always the chance of worse to come.

Frank Knight, who grew up in poverty on a farm in Illi-
nois and eventually taught economics at the University of Chicago for 44 years, made a distinction between financial risk and what he called “uncertainty,” which is utterly different. Risk involves probability that we can know and measure by looking at history. “Extrapolation of past frequencies is the favored method for arriving at judgments about what lies ahead,” wrote the economist Peter L. Bernstein in Against the Gods, a history of risk. After all, the past is all we have to go on.

But in his 1921 book, Risk, Uncertainty, and Profit, Knight was talking about events unseen in the past: a bolt from the blue, planes crashing into the World Trade Center, the “black swans” we can’t possibly predict. Investors are smart enough to understand that such things can happen even if they can’t know what they are in advance. Drawing on Knight, John Maynard Keynes wrote in 1937, “About these matters, there is no scientific basis on which to form any calculable probability whatever. We simply cannot know!” The crazy short-term ups and downs of markets offer premonitions.

INVESTING IS a contest between a scary short term and a more stable, fruitful long term. Like Anne Scheiber, you get paid for perseverance—or, as I said earlier, for faith. It’s important to be reminded once in a while that there is a basis for such faith. America’s businesses and our economy are unsurpassed—miles ahead. U.S. gross domestic product has declined just eight times in the past 50 calendar years, and only three of those declines exceeded 1 percent. All but two of the eight declines were erased by greater growth the next year. The U.S. economy remains by far the largest in the world, 50 percent bigger than China’s, which has four times the American population.

The U.S. leads the world in technology, pharmaceuticals, and oil exports, in consumer-product innovation, marketing, entertainment, in Nobel Prizes, weapons production, athletics, and graduate education. Over the last 10 years, the U.S. benchmark equity index, Standard & Poor’s 500, has returned an annual average of 16 percent while the MSCI EAFE index, which reflects the performance of stocks in the rest of the world, has returned just 7 percent.

The ultimate reason that U.S. stocks are such a good investment is that the U.S. is such a good investment. The problem is that so few Americans are benefiting through stock ownership. In his Times piece, Karabell urged Congress to draw up “innovative laws and nuanced rules to better distribute the gains of capitalism.” And he asked, “Why not use the tax code to nudge companies to give all workers shares in the company so that labor enjoys some of the benefits of capital? Or tie wage increases to the profitability of the company rather than indexing them to inflation?”

No, please don’t. There’s no need. Just make it easier for people to own stock. The Individual Retirement Account, or IRA, was launched by legislation in 1974, and the 401(k) plan, which let companies provide tax-deferred stock and bond accounts to their employees, was part of the Revenue Act of 1978. The Roth IRA, introduced in 1997, let Americans withdraw their accumulated assets tax-free. All of these retirement vehicles have severe limits on how much you can invest and when you can take the money out.

A better system would merely allow anyone to make stock and bond investments of any size for a prescribed holding period—say, 10 years—and make tax-free withdrawals for reasons of one’s own choosing. Alas, low-income Americans would be left out. If they’re living from paycheck to paycheck, they don’t have anything left over to invest. That’s a reason to resurrect an old idea that was practically killed off by the 2008 recession: opt-in private stock accounts as part of Social Security.

Workers would be able designate part of their payroll taxes to go to a stock index fund with a commensurate reduction in government-provided retirement benefits. Not only do stocks return more than the returns to Social Security contributions, but workers would be able to build up assets that they could pass on to their heirs. In a virtuous circle, more private investment helps the economy as well by increasing the savings rate.

IN WRITING ABOUT investing for more than 40 years, I have come up with my own equity-premium puzzle. Why is it that more people aren’t like Anne Scheiber? The U.S. economy has shown its mettle, and investing has become a ridiculously simple proposition. Low-cost index funds make it easy to get cheap diversification. The SPDR Dow Jones Industrial Average exchange-traded fund, nicknamed Diamonds, allows you to buy the 30 stocks of the Dow for an annual expense ratio of just 0.16 percent. Or if you want a broader bunch, the Vanguard 500 Index, a mutual fund whose portfolio comprises the 500 large-capitalization companies of the Standard & Poor’s 500, charges 0.14 percent.

The hard part is discipline or, better, faith—even in the face of politicians with their trillion-dollar social-welfare bills. My recommendation is to pay no attention. Just have your broker or your bank withdraw the same amount each month from your checking account or paycheck and buy more shares of the Dow or the S&P. Stock prices, which look to the American future with confidence even if the rest of us sometimes don’t, will keep going up.

It’s the ultimate safe bet. ✠
The Coup Against Democracy That Wasn’t

When it comes to Iran, elite opinion has been libeling America for seven decades

By Ray Takeyh

EVEN DECADES after the 1953 coup in Iran that toppled the country’s prime minister, Mohammad Mossadeq, a fundamentally distorted portrait of this highly controversial event continues to cast a shadow on elite judgments about the virtues of American power. For generations of liberal politicians and professors, the coup has provided an upsetting narrative in which a malevolent America strangled a nascent Persian democracy because Iran dared to nationalize its oil. And the destruction wrought by the United States wasn’t just about profits, according to the narrative. It’s that the American imperium could not tolerate neutralism in the Third World in the 1950s and needed compliant and brutal allies like the Shah of Iran. Thus, supposedly, imperialism and greed came together to deliver a deadly blow to a nation seeking self-determination.

The coup has proven irresistible as a talking point for Democratic Party politicians hungry for some kind of rapprochement with the current Iranian regime. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was one of the first to rush into this contested terrain during the Clinton administration: “In 1953, the United States played a significant role in orchestrating the overthrow of Iran’s popular prime minister, Mohammad

Ray Takeyh is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and the author of The Last Shah: America, Iran, and the Fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty.
Mossadeq...The coup was clearly a setback for Iran's political development.” A decade later, in 2009, Barack Obama invoked the coup in his maiden speech to the Muslim world in Cairo: “In the middle of the Cold War, the United States played a role in the overthrow of the democratically elected Iranian government.” In his memoir, Obama was more expansive, using the coup—code-named Operation Ajax—to castigate an entire generation of American policymakers:

Operation Ajax set a pattern for US miscalculation dealing with developing countries that lasted throughout the Cold War: mistaking nationalist aspirations for Communist plots; equating commercial interest with national security, subverting democratically elected governments and aligning ourselves with autocrats when we determined it was to our benefit.

But what happens if everything we have been told about the coup is wrong? What happens if the establishment consensus that has so penetrated our imagination is false?
Because it is.

To begin with: Mossadeq had not been democratically elected. And far from being a paragon of democratic virtue, he was not beyond using unconstitutional and illegal methods to sustain his power. Both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations had sincerely sought to craft a fair compromise between Iran and the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company whose assets Mossadeq had nationalized. And most important, the coup itself was very much an Iranian initiative.

By dispelling these myths, we can make better sense of U.S. relations with Iran in those years—and, indeed, throughout the next decades before the installation of the radical Islamic regime that now poses an existential threat to Israel and the Middle East. What a clear-eyed view reveals is that the United States was, if anything, naively well-intentioned.

The oft-repeated phrase that Mohammad Mossadeq was ‘democratically elected’ is a misunderstanding; he rose by royal decree, not a national plebiscite.

Mossadeq,...The coup was clearly a setback for Iran's political development.”

T
HE ANGLO-IRANIAN Oil Company, or AIOC, had dominated Persia's oil fields since the turn of the century. The fact that the British government owned a majority of the company's shares gave the entire enterprise an official standing. The arrangement was exploitative, as the AIOC routinely paid more in taxes to Britain than it provided in revenues to Iran. After World War II, with the inexorable rise of anti-colonial nationalism, that anachronistic arrangement became unsustainable.

The most ardent champion of the oil-nationalization movement was Mossadeq, an elderly parliamentarian (he was born in 1882) and a towering figure in Tehran's political establishment upon his appointment as prime minister in 1951—at a moment when the politics of Iran could best be characterized as “elite pluralism.” Persia was the domain of aristocrats; its landed gentry, leading merchants, and clerics dominated cabinets and parliaments. The system was not without its checks and balances, as the cantankerous nobility was jealous of its prerogatives, and the monarchy was hemmed in on all sides by competing institutions. The young shah, 32-year-old Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was too hesitant and uncertain of his authority to challenge this governing arrangement.

The oft-repeated phrase that Mossadeq was “democratically elected” is a misunderstanding; he rose by royal decree, not a national plebiscite. Once the parliament passed an oil-nationalization bill in 1951, it was only natural for the plan's architect to be offered the premiership. But in many ways, Mossadeq was the wrong choice for a position that he had coveted much of his life. At the time of his appointment, he was 69. A stubborn man who brooked no dissent, Mossadeq despised the British and had little use for compromise solutions.

The United States initially became involved in the oil dispute at Iran's invitation. Shortly after assuming the premiership, Mossadeq wrote to President Harry Truman and asked for arbitration since America was a “strong supporter of freedom and sovereignty of nations—a belief evidenced by the sacrifices of the great-heartfelt nation in the last two world wars.” Thus began a series of American diplomatic initiatives, all of which were rejected by Mossadeq.

From the outset, the Americans did not contest Iran's right to reclaim its natural resource. Washington was looking for an arrangement whereby Iran would be in charge of its oil, but Britain would be compensated for its seized assets and play a role in the management of Iran's oil fields given its expertise and experience. The American attitude caused
considerable consternation in Whitehall. At a time when British soldiers were fighting and dying on the battlefields of Korea alongside Americans, the Britons expected more support from the United States. The vast literature on the coup that obsessively chronicles Iranian grievances has little to say about the tensions in the Anglo-American relations caused by Truman’s evenhanded approach to the dispute.

The first American who tried his hand at crafting a solution was one of the Democratic Party’s most able troubleshooters, Averell Harriman. Harriman’s talks with Mossadeq revealed the difficulties America was to encounter. Arriving at the prime minister’s house and ushered into the bedroom where he held court, the American envoy was greeted with a rant against the British. “You don’t know how crafty they are,” Mossadeq raged. “You don’t know how evil they are.” All of Harriman’s detailed studies and proposals were casually brushed aside by Mossadeq. An exasperated Harriman could only report to Truman that Mossadeq “expects foreign [oil] staff to work on his terms...and Iran to get all the profits with compensation only to owners for property taken over. In his dream world, the simple passage of legislation nationalizing the oil industry creates a profitable business and everyone is expected to help Iran on terms that he lays down.”

Harriman’s failure did not cause Truman to forsake diplomacy. A trip by Mossadeq to America in October 1951 presented another opportunity. This time, the American chosen for the task was Assistant Secretary of State George McGhee. The so-called McGhee formula again accepted that Iran would be in charge of its oil—but given the country’s technical limitations, the formula involved granting an international firm, such as the Royal Dutch Shell Company, the right to operate the oil fields on Iran’s behalf. The AIOC would be offered a generous compensation package, including the right to purchase Iranian oil. Mossadeq seemed to agree, and everyone in Washington assumed that the crisis had finally passed.

But before a deal could be announced, Mossadeq summoned McGhee and told him that he “could not sign any agreement until he had first submitted it to the parliament and parliamentary commission for approval.” He further stunned McGhee, saying that he “would forward the agreement to the parliament without endorsing it.” It became apparent to Americans that Mossadeq was too concerned about his domestic political standing to press forward a compromise accord. Indeed, a mischievous Mossadeq confirmed this view when he confided to his American translator, Vernon Walter, “Don’t you realize, that returning to Iran empty-handed, I return in a much stronger position than if I returned with an agreement which I would have to sell to my fanatics.”

In the meantime, Iran was coming undone. By 1952, its economy was in shambles because Mossadeq could not overcome a British embargo imposed after the nationalization to sell his oil. The prime minister had long proposed the absurdity of an “oil-less economy” whereby Iran would ensure its financial stability by relying on its internal markets. But because oil was Iran’s principal staple commodity, and without proceeds from it, the state treasury quickly emptied. As the economic situation deteriorated, many in Tehran began to question Mossadeq’s stewardship of the country. The prime minister’s response was to crush dissent. He worked to hollow out the monarchy, reduce the parliament to a rubber stamp, and separate religion from politics. He was inaugurating a war against Iran’s aristocratic elite and its traditional institutions.

EVEN BEFORE Dwight Eisenhower was inaugurated in 1953, Mossadeq wrote to the incoming president to complain that the Truman administration had “pursued what appears to the Iranian people a policy of supporting the British Government and the AIOC.” This was an unfair characterization of an administration that had devised many proposals Mossadeq had summarily rejected. Still, Eisenhower responded calmly, “I hope our own future relationships will be completely free of any suspicions, but on the contrary will be characterized by confidence and trust inspired by frankness and friendliness.”

Eisenhower understood that Mossadeq belonged to a new generation of Third World leaders, and that if the United States were to wage the Cold War effectively beyond the boundaries of Europe, it would have to make common cause with credible nationalists who abjured Communism. This was shocking to Winston Churchill, who had recently returned to power hoping to revive the British Empire. Churchill quickly
dispatched his foreign secretary, Anthony Eden, to Washington for a firsthand assessment. Eden was stunned by Eisenhower’s accommodationist attitude. Eisenhower bluntly told Eden that he considered Mossadeq “the only hope for the West in Iran” and that he “would like to give the guy ten million bucks.”

As a junior partner, Britain had no choice but to go along with more diplomacy. It would prove to be Mossadeq who came to Britain’s rescue by poisoning the well with the Americans. Washington soon made another offer to Iran. This time a multinational consortium would operate the oil fields on behalf of the AIOC. Until a final agreement could be worked out, the United States would purchase a large quantity of Iranian oil and offer $50 million in aid to stabilize Tehran’s finances. The value of the AIOC’s assets nationalized by Iran would be determined by the International Court of Justice. Once the Court rendered its judgment, Iran would make the necessary payment. The principal area of disagreement would be how much compensation the AIOC was entitled to, given that its contract with Iran had been abrogated by the nationalization before its maturation date.

Mossadeq played his usual game of privately welcoming the offer and then publicly rejecting it. He was temperamentally incapable of compromise and assumed that if he just held tight, eventually the Western powers would concede to his maximalist terms. He was unable to see the generosity of offers that he was dismissing.

Mossadeq’s last months in power were lonely ones. As the negotiations stalemated and the economy cratered, the Persian aristocracy began to turn against one of its own. The National Front party fractured as the elderly politicians who had started it with Mossadeq abandoned him. The clerical order, always suspicious of Mossadeq’s secular bent, grew concerned about growing leftist influence. The parliament became a seat of anti-Mossadeq agitation while the merchant class feared being dispossessed. The shah brooded in his palaces but was too timid to take charge. The armed forces, as the guardians of the nation, dreaded all the disorder around them. While the Iranian political class had supported the nationalization of oil, many understood the importance of getting some agreement to prevent a national catastrophe.

Mossadeq dealt with all this by attempting to purge his critics. A transparently fraudulent referendum dissolved the parliament. With a straight face, Mossadeq reported that the vote for disbanding the chamber was 2 million in favor and 1,207 against. This was a particularly maladroit move, given that the speaker of the parliament was Ayatollah Abul-Qasem Kashani, a clerical activist with ample street power. Kashani joined the ranks of the opposition. The armed-forces budget was slashed and many leading officers were cashiered. The shah lost control of the Ministry of War, a traditional monarchical prerogative, and was prohibited from having direct contact with military officers. Mossadeq, the man who would be posthumously commemorated by many Westerners as a rare democrat, was busy ushering in a despotic order.

Throughout Mossadeq’s tenure, numerous Iranian politicians had appealed to the U.S. Embassy to help them depose the prime minister. Ambassador Lloyd Henderson rejected all such entreaties and insisted that the Iranians sort out their own affairs. But by the spring of 1953, there was a subtle change in America’s attitude. And that change came about not because Washington feared democracy in Iran, but because it worried that Mossadeq’s dictatorship was vulnerable to Communist takeover from the country’s Tudeh party. America’s plot was not against democracy but despotic rule.

The intelligence community was quick to stress these themes. As early as February, the CIA warned Eisenhower that “there is the possibility that a communist seizure of power in Iran may take place imperceptibly over a considerable period of time. Under this contingency, it would be extremely difficult to identify and demonstrate to our allies that specific countermeasures were required to prevent communist infiltration from reaching the point where it would be able to significantly influence the policies of the Iranian government.” Three months later, the agency again noted that “while Tudeh’s popular strength remains about the same, its relative political position has grown relatively stronger as a result of continuing penetration of government agencies and the disruptive effects of Mossadeq’s struggle with the opposition.” The pattern in Iran appeared eerily similar to that of Eastern Europe, where Communist parties had first infiltrated popular-front governments before taking full control.

In a paradoxical way, Mossadeq confirmed the American intelligence assessments. Given his dire eco-

Washington worried that Mossadeq’s dictatorship was vulnerable to Communist takeover. America’s plot was not against democracy but despotic rule.
There was already a powerful coalition of clerics, generals, and merchants ready to dispose of the prime minister whose petulance was ruining the country.

nomic situation, he sought to extort money from Washington by invoking the Communist threat. Mossadeq summoned Henderson to his office and insisted that unless the United States purchased large quantities of Iranian oil, “there would be a revolution in Iran in thirty days.” When this failed to budge Henderson, Mossadeq warned in their next meeting, “If the National Front government should pass out of existence, only confusion or the Tudeh would take over.” Both Mossadeq and the CIA were telling Eisenhower that Iran was slipping away.

O
n JUNE 23, 1953, the CIA plan code-named TP-AJAX was approved by Eisenhower. The coup that would prove a source of contention was remarkably simple. General Fazlollah Zahedi, a former cabinet member in Mossadeq’s government and one of Iran’s more distinguished generals, was identified as a key figure. This was hardly surprising, as Zahedi had been busy putting together a military network and had already made contact with the clerical leaders and political actors. The CIA launched a crude propaganda campaign that seemed transparent and false. Among its claims was that Mossadeq was of Jewish ancestry; evidently, many in Langley assumed that the Persians shared their anti-Semitism. The most useful contribution that the United States made was to press the shah to dismiss his prime minister. The monarch had the legal authority to do so, but given his propensity to fade in times of crisis, he needed ample American nudging.

The man chosen to lead the CIA’s efforts was Kermit Roosevelt, whose pedigree and connections were unmatched. The grandson of one president, Theodore, and the cousin of another, Franklin, he was one of the founding members of the agency and an eager proponent of meddling in the affairs of other countries. His task was complicated by the fact that the CIA by its own admission “did not possess any military assets” in Iran. The Americans were fortunate that Zahedi had already organized key divisions of the armed forces. The fact that Mossadeq had steadily shed supporters and alienated key segments of society made the task of displacing him seem easier. There was already a powerful coalition of clerics, generals, and merchants ready to dispose of the prime minister whose petulance was ruining the country.

All of these contingencies would have been unnecessary if the shah had simply discharged his prime minister. But he was not the type to assume responsibility for tough decisions. The recruitment of the monarch became America’s most important objective and its most consequential contribution to the coup. A series of emissaries now journeyed to the palace and pressed the diffident monarch to assert his powers. The shah detested Mossadeq and understood that he was doing immense damage to the country. Pahlavi argued, pleaded, and offered to give verbal but not written consent to firing Mossadeq. In one of their secret meetings, the shah insisted to Roosevelt that he could not act unless he had an indication of Eisenhower’s direct support for the coup. Roosevelt arranged for Eisenhower to insert a passage in his next speech stressing that America would not allow Iran to fall to Communism. This seemed to have done the trick. The shah signed the orders dismissing Mossadeq and appointing Zahedi as the new premier.

It must be noted that once the monarchical decree was issued, Mossadeq’s hold on power was rendered illegal. All discussion of the coup should not obscure the fact that once the shah issued his edict, Mossadeq no longer had a constitutional right to his position.

On the night of August 5, Colonel Nematollah Nasiri, commander of the Imperial Guards, was dispatched to the prime minister’s residence to deliver the decree dismissing him. He was quickly arrested by Mossadeq’s loyalists. The Tudeh party’s agents in the armed forces had tipped off Mossadeq, who was ready for Nasiri. Upon hearing the news, the shah, as was his wont, quickly fled the country. The ousting of Mossadeq was a bust.

In Washington, the news was received with fear and resignation. The State Department acknowledged that the “operation has been tried and failed.” The CIA informed the station in Tehran, “We should not participate in any operations against Mossadeq which could be traced back to us and further compromise our relations with him [Mossadeq] which may become the only course of action left open to us.” It was left to Walter Bedell Smith, Eisenhower’s crusty aide, to deliver the bad news to the president. Smith—who as Eisenhower’s chief of staff during World War II had grown accustomed to giving his boss difficult news in

Commentary
So long as the prevailing narrative of the 1953 coup remains unchallenged, the Islamic Republic will have ready-made defenders in liberal circles.

an unvarnished fashion—told the president that “we now have to take a whole new look at the Iranian situation and probably have to snuggle up to Mossadeq if we are going to save anything there.”

The events of the next several days have become a source of great controversy. Kermit Roosevelt, sitting in Tehran, was not sure that it was all over. There was too much anti-Mossadeq ferment in the streets, and there were still too many Iranian plotters on the loose. Roosevelt’s primary contribution to the unfolding drama was to circulate to the foreign and domestic press the shah’s decree dismissing Mossadeq. Mossadeq did not disclose in a radio address to the nation that he had been fired; he merely stated that an illegal coup had been thwarted. Roosevelt correctly sensed that once the decree made its way to the press, it would galvanize the population and the armed forces on behalf of a monarchy that still enjoyed widespread support. This is hardly a sinister act, as all Roosevelt did was seek to inform as many people as possible about what had actually transpired.

Tudeh activists, sensing that their time may have come, began tearing down statues of the shah and calling for “democratic government.” This too resembled scenes from Eastern Europe, where Communist parties had come to power under similar banners. The protest and mayhem generated a backlash, and pro-shah elements took to the streets. Too often in the coup literature, these demonstrations are attributed to CIA funding. While it is certain that some agency money made its way to roughnecks, the sheer scale of protests suggests that they were actually the work of the clerical order. The senior ayatollahs were alarmed at the possibility of a Mossadeq-led secular republic that might fall prey to Communist rule. As the CIA station reported: “Religious leaders [are] now desperate. Will attempt anything. Will try [to] save Islam and the Shah of Iran.” The mullahs’ street muscle was unparalleled, and at that point they were still comfortable with a young monarch deferential to their claims.

In the end, Mossadeq’s rule did come to an end. While the Americans were trying to figure out what was taking place, Zahedi and his men were on the move. Throughout this time, Zahedi was in various hiding places, directing army units into action and alerting sleeping cells in the armed forces. Washington was oblivious to all this, as the CIA station confessed: “As of night of August 13 CIA cut out of military preparations by Batmanqelij [army chief of staff] and Zahedi.” The soldiers methodically moved into Tehran, taking over key government buildings and finally announcing the collapse of the Mossadeq regime. The prime minister turned himself in; he was too much of an establishmentarian to attempt a life on the run.

In the decades since, all the complexities of the coup have been stripped away in favor of the simplistic claim that the red-baiting Eisenhower overthrew a democratically elected prime minister. It is the Middle Eastern studies and international-relations professoriate that bear the burden of blame for perpetuating a false narrative. The leftist takeover of college campuses in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, which has only deepened over the past two generations, has led professors past and present to look for ways to blame the problems of the Third World on a villainous America. The coup in Iran has long served as one of their favorite indictments of American power, and that indictment has taken root. Indeed, the Academy Award–winning film Argo even suggested that the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in 1979 was a justifiable response to the coup.

The principal beneficiary of all this historical malpractice has been the Islamic Republic. The theocratic state has whitewashed the clerical complicity in the monarchical restoration in 1953, and its suave diplomats have relentlessly reminded American audiences of their country’s guilt. The Democrats who view diplomacy with Iran as an occasion for propitiating past grievances have fallen prey to this game. Barack Obama was the most noteworthy but hardly the only defender of such discursive notions. The task many Democrats have assigned themselves is not to restrain Iranian power but to expunge past sins. Politicians seeking to right wrongs are most likely to negotiate deficient agreements such as the Iran nuclear deal and ignore the theocracy’s imperial rampage throughout the Middle East.

The coup of 1953 is thus a living event. And so long as the prevailing narrative of the coup remains unchallenged, the Islamic Republic will have ready-made defenders in liberal circles. The key to unraveling the Islamist regime must start with setting the record straight.
An Important Blow Against UN Anti-Semitism

A notorious international conference was held again—only this time with a twist

By Anne Bayefsky

THE UNITED NATIONS is a place where lies are told.” So said Daniel Patrick Moynihan on November 10, 1975. As America’s ambassador to the UN, Moynihan was addressing the General Assembly after it had adopted a resolution declaring the self-determination of the Jewish people—Zionism—to be a form of racism. Forty-six years later, on September 22, 2021, the General Assembly restated that lie. This time, though, 38 countries voted with their feet and boycotted the place where lies are told. That’s more than the 35 nations that in 1975 had voted against the resolution rightly characterized by Moynihan as an “abomination of anti-Semitism.” It was the first major global loss for the Palestinian legal and political war on the Jewish state in a long time.

The blow was delivered at the fourth iteration of the UN’s “anti-racist” world conference, which was first convened in Durban, South Africa, in 2001. Durban IV had been carefully planned for over a year as a 20th-anniversary commemoration of what became a global anti-Semitic hatefest—one that ended three days before 9/11. NGO representatives and members of so-called civil society roamed the conference grounds and the streets of Durban with signs that read: “For the liberation of Quds, machine-guns based upon FAITH and ISLAM must be used,” “the martyrs’ blood irrigates the tree of revolution in Palestine,” and “down with Nazi-Israeli apartheid.”

In government backrooms, negotiators at the first Durban conference had deleted draft language from the final declaration that would have “underline[d] the role of political leaders in combating anti-Semitism” and urged states to “provide information about good practices for combating

Anne Bayefsky is the director of the Touro Institute on Human Rights and the Holocaust, and president of Human Rights Voices.
anti-Semitism.” They got rid of the call for “legal and judicial cooperation in combating anti-Semitism” and the recommendation to “take action against Holocaust denial” and promote “the study of the Holocaust.” In short, the Durban Declaration that emerged from the 2001 world conference replicated the 1975 lie and claimed that Palestinians were victims of Israeli racism. The only state the declaration specifically denounced under the UN banner of combating racism and xenophobia was the Jewish state.

The United States and Israel walked out of the conference and, for the past 20 years, have refused to legitimize Durban and its message. The UN has done just the opposite. Successive UN high commissioners for human rights—Mary Robinson, Navi Pillay, and Michelle Bachelet—have championed Durban. Pillay, a native of Durban herself, launched Durban II and III in the form of follow-up conferences and a 10th-anniversary gala.

In the run-up to 2021, Palestinians and their UN allies believed that they had been handed a unique opportunity to reframe their cause in terms that played on perceived American bigotry. Filling the airwaves of UNWebTV came broadcasts, statements, resolutions, and reports on American racism and the alleged despoliation of the U.S.’s Constitution and its national soul. In December 2020, the General Assembly decided to mark the 20th anniversary of the Durban conference and give the event the theme of “people of African descent.” Palestinian officials imaginatively rewrote their history as a tale that mirrored that of African Americans.

Durban IV took place not in South Africa but in New York and was deliberately scheduled to capitalize on the presence of hundreds of world leaders already assembled for the annual opening of the General Assembly. And so, on September 22, 2021, the usual UN “General Debate” was interrupted midway for the affair.

The boycott spoiled the party. Outside the UN event, standing by Israel were the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, over three-quarters of European Union states—including France and Germany—and others from Eastern Europe and Latin America.

The only state the Durban Declaration specifically denounced under the UN banner of combating racism and xenophobia was the Jewish state.

Because the UN broadcast the event worldwide, many observers noticed that the lies being told were not only about Jews. The opening session of Durban IV featured Saudi Arabia, which had been given the honor of speaking on behalf of the 54 states in the Asian regional group. In a country where women are chattel, the public practice of Christianity is illegal, and critics are flogged or otherwise dispatched, Saudi UN Ambassador Abdallah Al-Mouallimi said, “We reaffirm our belief, as we have always, in the importance of spreading a counsel of peace and dialogue among
civilizations, highlighting tolerance and respect for
diversity.”

China, now devastating a million Uyghurs, contributed this to the UN’s Durban forum: “China
believes in a culture of respect, tolerance, and equality,
and a social environment free from discrimination.”

And Qatar (where noncitizens without political rights
and few civil liberties are 90 percent of the popula-
tion) added this to the Durban hymn book: “We aim
to strengthen the values of toler-
ance and equality for everyone...
with 1 million foreigners living
with Qataris in perfect har-
mony.”

Durban IV’s scripted per-
formance culminated in the
General Assembly’s adoption of
a “political declaration.” It reaf-
firmed the original Durban Declaration, demanded
its “full implementation,” and called for it to be “main-
streamed” throughout the entire “United Nations sys-
tem.” Here’s what it did not do. On July 23, 2021, during
negotiations, the European Union asked for a declara-
tion that “unequivocally condemns antisemitism in
all its forms and manifestations, and urges states to
intensify efforts to prevent and combat antisemitism,
including hate speech and violence motivated by an-
tisemitism.” The proposal was rejected along with an
EU call at the end of August for the declaration to en-
courage “national action plans to prevent and combat
antisemitism.”

The Palestinians and South Africans evidently
believed that they could spin the story and minimize
any negative fallout. A week before Durban IV, on
September 14, 2021, the Palestinian Authority (PA)
issued a statement railing against the boycott
and representing themselves as torch carriers for “people
of African descent.” Notwithstanding the UN’s own
concerted effort to portray Durban as having “tran-
scended divisive and intolerant approaches,” in the
words of Navi Pillay, the Palestinian meltdown gave
the game away. In the words of the PA: “Rooted in the
valiant struggle of South Africans against apartheid,
the Durban Conference serves as basis for anti-racism
advocacy efforts worldwide....The Palestinian people,
whose noble struggle against Israel’s apartheid contin-
ues, consider themselves an integral component in the
efforts to combat all forms of systematic racism and
discrimination.”

During Durban IV, Palestinian and South Afri-
can representatives strived mightily to cast the boy-
cotters as racists. The UN proceedings also included
handpicked nongovernmental speakers chosen for
their interest in singling out and trashing the United
States, as well as Israel. Vanessa Griddine Jones—who
claimed to be speaking “on behalf of” Democratic
Representative Bennie Thompson, chairman of the
Congressional Black Caucus Political Education and
Leadership Institute—said of the United States: “Its
power structures still seek to restrict our ability to vote
and deprive us of life, liberty, and the fabled pursuit of
happiness.”

The UN’s Durban proceedings included
handpicked nongovernmental speakers
chosen for their interest in singling out
and trashing the U.S., as well as Israel.

The plight of Africans enslaved in Libya, the
Baha’is tortured in Iran, the Africans subjugated in
Mauritania, the clans starved in Somalia, the ethnic
groups slaughtered in Sudan and South Sudan, and
the human beings relegated to mass graves in Ethio-
pia—none of them elicited a single word in eight hours
of speeches about combating racism and xenophobia
and peddling the Durban mantra.

When the General Assembly selected the theme
of Durban IV, it deliberately jettisoned the words
“Africans and” before “people of African descent.” For
Palestinian Arabs and others, it was politically prefer-
able to pretend to have more in common with African
American victims of slavery than the Arab masters of
the trans-Saharan or East African slave trade.

Clearly, selling Durban required historical revi-
sionism, a point exemplified by Natalia Kamen, execu-
tive director of the UN Population Fund. She intoned
to her Durban IV listeners: “I was present in Durban to
witness the power of voice, inclusion.” This was an ut-
ter falsehood, as every Jew present at the first Durban
conference (myself included) could attest.

In addition to sacrificing the truth, Durban IV
laid bare that combating racism in UN circles comes
with another kind of price tag. The prime minister of
Barbados, Mia Mottley, spelled out a list of demands
embedded in the implementation of the Durban
Declaration: reparations in the form of “a technology
transfer program,” “capital transfers,” “debt cancel-
ations,” “a reparatory restructuring of international
institutions,” a “restructure” of the “terms of interna-
tional trade and the...rules of international finance
and economic governance,” as well as a “transforma-
tive global development agenda.” (All of which, she
assured Durban fans, “need not be contentious.”)
I N THINKING ABOUT Durban IV, a few conclusions suggest themselves.

First, the UN is still a place where lies are told. And it’s a place where calls for the destruction of a UN member state are answered not by cutting the mic and escorting the speaker off the premises but instead by “I thank the minister of foreign affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran.”

Second, for the enemies of Israel who had high hopes that the 20th-anniversary celebration would fast-track Israel to political isolation and oblivion, the global gathering was instead a major setback. Not only did 38 states boycott the event, but they boycotted it specifically because the demonization of Israel was recognized as a form of anti-Semitism.

Third, remember the identity of the three European nations that openly aligned themselves with the inveterate enemies of the Jewish state. Belgium, Ireland, and Portugal all spoke out in favor of the affair. Another handful of EU states—Finland, Luxembourg, and Malta—refused to boycott it.

Fourth, the Palestinian leadership has no intention of letting facts get in the way of UN fictions. After the escalation of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict in May 2021, the Palestinians maneuvered the UN Human Rights Council into creating the mother of all anti-Israel investigations—an investigation with no equal in the history of the United Nations. The Council established “an ongoing” “commission of inquiry” aimed at Israel and tasked with uncovering “all underlying root causes of recurrent tensions, instability and protraction of conflict, including systematic discrimination and repression based on national, ethnic, racial or religious identity.” And whom did the UN select to chair this commission to ferret out the perpetrators of racial and religious discrimination in this context? None other than Navi Pillay, reigning monarch of all things Durban. This is the same woman who sat glued to her seat at Durban II, directly behind Ahmadinejad as he laid out his case for a second Holocaust. Multiple diplomats got up and walked out when they heard his words. But Pillay—who had received his speech in advance of delivery—stayed where she was.

Finally, in one of its first foreign-policy actions, the Biden administration announced it would seek (and has since secured) a seat on the UN Human Rights Council, a subsidiary of the General Assembly. President Biden even trumpeted the move in his maiden speech to the General Assembly on September 21, 2021. So the Biden administration says “no” to the Durban Declaration and its demonization of Israel on the grounds of it being unconscionable anti-Semitism. And it says “yes” to the very UN body dedicated to promoting the Durban Declaration and its anti-Semitic goals. This is an incoherent and dangerous posture that legitimizes the stronghold of anti-Semites while professing to delegitimize anti-Semitism.

THERE’S A TELLING postscript to Durban IV. A mere two weeks after the event, the UN’s Israel-bashers were back in action and attempting to reverse the moral defeat imparted by the Durban boycott. The UN Human Rights Council provided the path.

Led by four co-sponsors—Cameroon (on behalf of African states), Turkey, Yemen, and Chile—the Council was presented with a resolution on combating racism, xenophobia, and related intolerance. It was irrelevant that the Islamic states of Cameroon, Turkey, and Yemen play lead roles in promoting such intolerance, including anti-Semitism. Chile, which is not even a member of the Human Rights Council, took its cue from its former president, Michelle Bachelet, who is the current UN high commissioner for human rights, an architect of Durban IV, and a supporter of the BDS campaign to gut Jewish self-determination.

The proposed resolution warmly welcomed Durban IV and its “political declaration,” and ordered the UN secretary-general and the high commissioner to produce an “outreach and a public information campaign for the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary...and follow-up thereto.” In other words, the resolution was diametrically opposed to the policy decision that had been taken by the 38 states that had boycotted Durban IV.

Twelve of those 38 states were also members of the 47-seat Human Rights Council and, therefore, faced the quandary of how to vote. They were Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and Uruguay. The resolution was cunningly crafted and ostensibly about combating racism. Opponents to it could anticipate that their objection would be framed as racist, as indeed it was. Additionally, objectors knew that they didn’t have the numbers to

Over the course of seven decades of the violent rejection of the Jewish state, the UN has provided Israel’s enemies with the political weaponry to avoid peace.
prevail. This is because almost all UN members avoid exposing the human-rights charade in operation at the UN’s top human-rights body. Some of the boycotting countries preferred to do battle on other ignominious resolutions on the Council’s agenda and worried about expending limited political capital. Opposing yet another anti-Jewish and anti-Israel UN resolution was annoying and troublesome—precisely the UN environment that anti-Semites can so readily manufacture.

The states that boycotted Durban IV, though, could not avoid the choice either to allow the resolution to be adopted by consensus or to “call for the vote” and demonstrate their objections. Britain stepped up and called for the vote. On October 11, 2021, the final tally was 32 in favor, 10 against, and 5 abstentions. Accompanying their no votes, the UK (speaking also on behalf of Australia), Germany, Austria and the Czech Republic made statements in “explanation of vote” that specifically referenced the issue of anti-Semitism.

As with the boycott of the 20th anniversary itself, those negative votes indicated that key democracies in the United Nations understand this truth: The UN’s discriminatory treatment of Israel, and especially Durban’s racism lie, is a form of modern anti-Semitism. That is truly important.

Still, these states are in the UN minority. The resolution was adopted. It demands the launch of a new UN “communications strategy” to flog the Durban Declaration and all its components worldwide, making special use of “social media” and targeting “young people,” the “news media,” and “educational entities.”

Ambassador Moynihan concluded his 1975 condemnation with these words: “A great evil has been loosed upon the world. The abomination of anti-Semitism... Evil enough in itself, but more ominous by far is the realization that now presses upon us—the realization that if there were no General Assembly, this could never have happened.”

Almost a half a century later, the realization presses upon us that if there were no General Assembly, the outrages of Durban I, II, III, and IV could never have happened. Over the course of seven decades of the violent rejection of the Jewish state, it is the United Nations that has provided Israel’s enemies with the political weaponry to avoid peace. It has promoted “Zionism is racism,” “apartheid Israel,” and Durban “victims” in order to isolate, sanction, and ultimately eliminate the Jewish state. Ominous, but, as the boycott of Durban IV proved, the UN is not omnipotent. At the same time, it makes doing the right thing more difficult, not less. UN-driven anti-Semitism will not be impeded by the faint of heart. 

The UN’s Israel-bashers attempted to reverse the moral defeat imparted by the Durban IV boycott. And the UN Human Rights Council provided the path.
Books Do Furnish a Civilization

Libraries and their glories

By Joseph Epstein

FOR THE TRUE bibliomaniac, libraries are temples, shrines, shuls, places of worship. They trace their lineage back to the great library of Alexandria begun by Alexander the Great’s lieutenant Ptolemy and his son. The library, variously estimated to contain somewhere between 200,000 and half a million scrolls, was said to have been accidentally destroyed in a fire set in a nearby harbor by Julius Caesar during his intervention on the side of Cleopatra in her war against her brother Ptolemy XIII. The great extant libraries are thought to include the Bodleian at Oxford, la Bibliothèque interuniversitaire de la Sorbonne, the British Museum, the Vatican Library, the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, the Peabody Conservatory Library in Baltimore, and a few others.

Most of these began life as personal collections of books built up and added onto over the decades, in some instances over the centuries. The bibliomaniac can only fantasize owning or even superintending as chief librarian the many books stored in such institutions. Meanwhile non-bibliophiles, even some philistines among them, often wish to attach themselves to the prestige of great libraries. The library, among other things, is a symbol of learning. In Margin of Hope, his autobiography, Irving Howe recounts how Abram Sachar called together a number of wealthy Jewish philanthropists in the hope of acquiring funds for a library for the newly founded Brandeis University. He regaled them with the prominence of Widener Library at Harvard in the lives of students, noting: “when the students at Harvard go to the library, they don’t say,

*The True University of these days is a collection of books.*

—THOMAS CARLYLE

Joseph Epstein has written for Commentary since 1963.
Though I much enjoy detective and crime stories on television and in the movies, I do not, I cannot, read either. Reading, somehow, is reserved for more serious business.

‘Let’s go to the library,’ they say, ‘Let’s go to Widener.’” Howe could sense in the men Sachar had gathered the thought: “Someday maybe they’ll say, ‘Let’s go to Shapiro!’” Without great difficulty, Sachar got the money for the Brandeis library.

My own first distinct memory of being in a library was in the fifth grade at Daniel Boone Elementary School, where the Chicago Public Library had sent round a representative to talk to us about the splendor of books. A heavily bosomed woman, giving off a strong odor of perfume, the Library Lady began by remarking that books—which she pronounced as if the word had five or six O’s—were our friends and would take us to exotic foreign shores and bring us treasures hitherto unimagined. She went on to say that, books being such valuable friends, we must not earmark their pages, or bend their spines, or write in or otherwise deface them, and continued in this manner for another 20 or so minutes. Before this talk, I had little interest in books; after it, I felt something closer to an antipathy toward them.

It was in the early-18th century that the rule of silence was first invoked and enforced in libraries. The users at the main library in Amsterdam, for example, were met by this greeting:

You learned sir, who enter among books,
don't slam the door with your tumultuous hand;
nor let your rowdy foot create a bang,
a nuisance to the Muse. Then, if you see someone
seated within, greet him by bowing,
and with a silent nod: nor waffle gossip:
here it's the dead who speak to them who work.

At the Boone School Library, run by another heavyset woman, a Miss Holmes, if you were caught talking, you would soon discover a tap on your shoulder and, in her low whisper, the words, “You’ll have to leave.”

When a boy, then, libraries were distinctly not my milieu. I felt more comfortable on playgrounds, ball fields, and pool halls than in them. In the dreary halls of libraries, disapproving spinsters seemed everywhere in charge. (Librarianship by World War I in the United States had become a largely female occupation, with 85 percent of American librarians being female.) If one were disorganized in one’s life, as I clearly was, books taken from them were likely to be returned late with small but irritating fines charged for tardiness. (On the subject of library fines, a friend told me that, having moved back into the neighborhood where he’d grown up, his wife learned upon attempting to take out a library card that he had a biography of the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Jesus Zapata 14 years overdue. The story would be rounded off nicely if she had asked if it were possible to renew it, but I gather she did not.)

Nor were books part of my home life. Both my parents were intelligent and well-spoken, but books had no place in their crowded lives or in our commodious apartment. My father read the Chicago Daily News, with its large cadre of foreign correspondents thought to be the newspaper of choice for thoughtful people in the Midwest in that day, and Time and Life magazines arrived weekly. But I cannot recall any books on the premises when I was growing up, not even a dictionary.

What turned me bookish was the University of Chicago, where I, never a notably good student, nevertheless caught the book bug big-time. At Chicago, where no second-line works were taught, I came to understand that nothing was more likely to widen my experience and deepen my understanding than books—and only good, or great, books. To this day, though I much enjoy detective and crime stories on television and in the movies, I do not, I cannot, read either. Reading, somehow, is reserved for more serious business.

Much as I came to delight in books, I cannot recall when I first developed an interest in owning them. Borrowing them from libraries sufficed. Traveling light was never my desire, but, as a single man, living alone, books never, to borrow a phrase from the novelist Anthony Powell, “furnished my rooms.” Nor did they in the early years of my marriage. I’m not certain even now when the desire to own the books I had read, or one day hoped to read, kicked in. But it did, to the point where I now live in an apartment with no fewer than 12 book cases, all fully packed, with a need for at least one or two more in which to store the books piled atop some of these cases or lying around the apartment on various tables and other flat surfaces.
A personal library is likely to reflect its owner's seriousness and to serve as a key to his intellectual autobiography. Sir Thomas Bodley (1545–1613), the founder of the Bodleian Library, wanted nothing to do with “idle books and raffle raffes,” a category that for him included Shakespeare. Most of Bodley’s own books were in Latin. I am reminded of going to dinner with my friend Edward Shils at the apartment of a former graduate student of his, on whose coffee table lay a 700-or-so-page biography of Robert Kennedy; Edward could not but convey his deep disappointment that anyone would waste his time on so trivial yet thick a book.

On a rough estimate, Shils’s own library contained no fewer than 16,000 books, English, French, and German, none of them “idle” or “raff raffes.” (Lord Acton apparently had a personal library of no fewer than 70,000 books.) One day I entered Edward’s apartment to find him razoring an introduction by Alfred Kazin out of one of his books. When I asked him why he was doing so, he replied, “I don’t want that Jew in my house.” (Shils was himself Jewish.) In his will he asked that these books be given to the library of Hebrew University in Jerusalem. (He also bequeathed me, along with two Jacob Epstein busts, his 26-volume set of William Hazlitt.) As Edward’s executor, I contacted a faculty member at Hebrew University about this generous benefaction, only to learn that the library could not accommodate so many books, which would cost roughly $100,000 to ship and catalog. The library did, though, accept a thousand books, which I sent and which they set out in a special section under his name. I later sold the remaining books for $166,000, which went into the Shils estate.

On a rough estimate, Edward Shils’s own library contained no fewer than 16,000 books, English, French, and German, none of them ‘idle’ or ‘riff raffes.’

I N THEIR NEW BOOK, The Library: A Fragile History, a splendid study of the institution of the library from its origins until today, Andrew Pettegree and Arthur der Weduwen recount the initiation, the innovations, and the dissolution of library after library, personal as well as public, scholarly as well as lending, over the centuries. The word “fragile” in their subtitle touches on the unsettled conditions of libraries throughout history. For books have everywhere and at all times been lost, stolen, vandalized, spoiled by neglect, while entire libraries have been abandoned, systematically despoiled, set afire, even deliberately bombed.

The Library chronicles the change in the manufacture of books from papyrus to parchment (between the third and sixth centuries c.e.) to print, with Gutenberg’s truly revolutionary invention of moveable type in the 1450s. (Thomas Carlyle wrote of it: “He who shortened the labor of Copyists by the device of Moveable Types was disbanding hired Armies, and cashiering most Kings and Senates, and creating a whole new Democratic world; he had invented the Art of Printing.”) The effect of these changes were all gradual; 90 years after Gutenberg’s invention, for example, the Merton College Library at Oxford still contained no printed books.

As for individual collectors, no more is known about the personal library of Aristotle, who inculcated Alexander the Great with a love of books, than that he had “assembled a personal collection of considerable size.” Strabo, Euclid, and Archimedes were, in effect, fellows at the original library at Alexandria, which they used to conduct their research. Fernando Colon (1488–1539), the son of Christopher Columbus, was the greatest collector of the early-sixteenth century and attempted to duplicate the library of Alexandria, near the city of Seville. After his death, Colon’s library was inherited by an uninterested nephew, who passed it along to a monastery and subsequently to the Seville Cathedral, where later many of the books were eliminated by the Spanish Inquisition.

Napoleon, one learns from The Library, “employed Stendhal to cherry-pick the libraries of Italy and Germany on behalf of the French national library.” Goethe was for a time supervisor of the ducal libraries in Weimar and Jena. Aside from Philip Larkin, for...
years the librarian at the University of Hull, the last important writer to have a full-time association with a library was Jorge Luis Borges, who in 1955 became the director of the Argentine National Library. It was a job he held through 1973, even though he had begun to lose his eyesight in the late 1950s. In “The Library of Babel,” Borges produced the only fiction set in a library that I know, one that contains a few volumes in which “the universe was justified” and “the fundamental mysteries of mankind... might be revealed,” but which no one is able to locate. How very, you might say, Borgesian!

Many of the great Greek and Roman works discovered in Italy during the Renaissance were salvaged and restored by monks set to full-time work as copyists. Many others were lost—works by Livy, Tacitus, Plutarch, and no one knows how many others. As the authors of The Library write: “This was but one of many examples we will see of the operation of a whimsical lottery that some texts would survive, poked away in some Bavarian monastery, while others would be lost forever.” In the 14th century, Boccaccio reported coming upon a trove of promising-looking texts in a monastery library only to discover that many of these works had been mutilated in various ways, “their sheets pared, cut out, used for making psalters; others were torn, burned, abandoned and left to the mercy of insects and weather. For all we know a now-lost essay of Seneca’s may have been used to wrap two cucumber sandwiches.” Who knows how many crucial works were destroyed during the dissolution of monasteries under Henry VIII?

In an earlier day, books—scrolls, really—were stored in boxes or crates. Later, in their more bookish form, books were often chained to desks, lest, owing to the silver and illuminated pages wealthy collectors trimmed them with, they be stolen. When shelves came into play to display books, they were at first set out horizontally, only later to be set up vertically as we now customarily do. Most libraries were restricted to the use of their owners or university scholars. Many, given the sumptuous decoration of many books, became status objects. On the fate of personal libraries, the authors of The Library write:

The essential problem was one that has not changed through the history of book collect-
In the days when libraries still had card catalogues, one regularly came upon books one hadn’t previously known about that proved pleasurable or important or both.

order, the Talmud was condemned, and burnings of it throughout Italy were undertaken.) The authors of *The Library* estimate that during World War II some 60 million books were lost in England alone.

Public libraries remain one of the great democratic institutions. One recalls Richard Wright, in his autobiography *Black Boy*, recounting how discovering books in the public library in Memphis opened the world for him and left him determined to become a writer. I gave one of the Mencken lectures at the Pratt Library in Baltimore in 1979, and the wonderfully diverse crowd that attended included a man who was Mencken’s bartender at one of his favorite hotels. He showed me a letter, framed in glass, from Mencken commending him on his high level of competence and devotion to his job. The library in Skokie, Illinois, has so many clubs and discussion groups that I have heard it said that people in their retirement years have moved to Skokie chiefly to avail themselves of the sociability to be found there.

Among the benefits of the apartment where I live is that the main branch of the Evanston Public Library is less than a block away. BN, or Before Netflix, I used it frequently to take out DVDs of *George Gently*, *A Touch of Frost*, *Murdoch Mysteries*, and other English detective shows as well as for occasional books and its excellent collections of classical and jazz music. I came to have pleasingly jokey relationships with many of its staff, and still do.

Three blocks away from my apartment is Northwestern University’s library, from which, as a retired teacher in the English Department, I used to take out books unavailable at the Evanston Public Library. I never kept a carrel there, which reminds me that my friend Arnaldo Momigliano, the great historiographer of the ancient world, used to tote around what I took to be at least two pounds of keys, most of them to carrels he occupied in libraries around the world.

The note of serendipity is one of the grand things about large libraries, discovering things one didn’t know were there. Strolling the CD section in the Evanston Library, I discover a Paul Robeson CD devoted to American folk songs; on another occasion, I find two Jean-Pierre Rampal jazz CDs. Among the DVDs, an early Humphrey Bogart film I hadn’t known about, *If Only She Could Cook*, turns up. I always enter the Evanston Public Library with a sense of pleasurable anticipation. In the days when libraries still had card catalogues, one regularly came upon books one hadn’t previously known about that proved pleasurable or important or both. The library of the future, alas, is likely to provide few such beneficial surprises. The authors of *The Library* note that the city of San Antonio has the first fully digitized library. I’ve made a mental note never to visit it.

I have what I suppose is a continuing relationship with the Library of Congress and the Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago. The former houses my correspondence and manuscripts during my 20-odd years as editor of the *American Scholar*, the intellectual quarterly of Phi Beta Kappa; the latter has, you should pardon the expression, my “papers,” which until they officially became my highfalutin “papers” I had thought of as my lowfalutin “mess, detritus, dreck.” I have never visited either. Should you ever be in the neighborhood of either library, you might want to drop in and check them out—being careful, of course, not to earmark their pages, or write in, or otherwise deface them, lest you bring down upon yourself the estimable fury of the Library Lady.»
The Left’s Crusade Against the 1990s
How progressives became Gingriches and Doles

By Noah Rothman

At the beginning of the 20th century’s last decade, public morality seemed to be at the center of the national conversation. Specifically, its decline.

The right lamented the ease with which people violated their marriage vows, the prevalence of abortion, and the licentiousness celebrated in popular culture. Conservatives agonized over children born into single-parent homes, the entitlement state’s deleterious effect on self-discipline, and declining stigmas around the accumulation of debt and assisted suicide.

Democrats and liberals, too, were invested in a moral reckoning. They focused their energies on a crusade to banish wanton sexual discrimination and harassment from the workplace. It informed the party’s effort to strengthen legislative protections for working women. It also allowed the party to claim that their efforts to deny Clarence Thomas a seat on the Supreme Court and banish Oregon Republican senator Bob Packwood from public life were driven by ethics, justice, and the quest for gender equity.

By the end of the 1990s, Democrats had moved on to other priorities. In 1999, Pew Research Center found that Democrats were more interested in expanding the social safety net so that the government might facilitate personal fulfillment in whatever forms it might take, even as the rest of the country worried that “the good life today is being tarnished by moral decay.” Liberals had raised self-actualization to a worthy pursuit, in part because they had committed themselves to the defense of a libertine president. The left’s own moral crusade on behalf of women took a back seat.

Still, Pew noted in 1999, “moral decline is prominent on the list of failures” that the American people
were perceiving. Left-leaning trendsetters mocked such notions. The pashas of popular culture—led by Hollywood’s most successful producer, Harvey Weinstein—ruthlessly mocked the right’s sanctimonious moralizers and their antiquated ideals. Maureen Dowd, of the New York Times, derided the GOP’s “uptight sourpusses” for looking upon the decade’s bounty in disgust.

By contrast, Republicans saw almost every discrete act of indecency and wickedness as an indictment of American society. At least, that’s how they talked. Just days before the 1994 midterm elections, for example, future House speaker Newt Gingrich leveraged Susan Smith’s horrific murder of her two young sons to prosecute the case against American degeneracy. “The mother killing her two children in South Carolina vividly reminds every American how sick the society is getting and how much we have to have change,” he said. The only path toward personal and national salvation, Gingrich advised, was to “vote Republican.”

What a difference a generation makes.

This outmoded dynamic—left-wing moral relativism and libertine self-indulgence, and right-wing prudery laden with religious overtones—is no longer operative. Today, a new moral order is on the rise—a far more conventional code that has found a surprising number of adherents among the progeny of those who came of age in the sybaritic Clinton years.

Modern liberals and progressives no longer see pleasure-seeking as a virtue. They have replaced it with a preachy judgmentalism that subsumes all of existence into a black-and-white morality play. The 1990s do not fit within that play’s limits. And today’s left-liberals are determined to demonize the fin-de-siècle decade because as they look back, they cannot abide what it meant to be a liberal at the time. They certainly cannot accept the fact that the right saw it all for what it really was.

We are witness to a left-wing crusade to anathematize the decade at the end of history. And it is succeeding in ways that conservatives who tried and failed to do the very same thing could only have ever dreamt of.

Modern liberals have replaced pleasure-seeking with a preachy judgmentalism that subsumes all of existence into a black-and-white morality play.
lobotomized American audiences flocked to the casual objectification of women on and off the screen to the irresponsible legitimization of “the sadness of white men,” the 1990s were hardly worth celebrating.

Wolcott’s and Franich’s complaints fell on deaf ears, as sentimental reflections on the 1990s became ubiquitous. Were the 1990s “the last great decade” National Geographic’s documentary series on the subject asked. CNN’s The Nineties engaged in a similarly misty-eyed survey of the period’s sociocultural landscape. The sitcom Roseanne was revived, as was Full House. Musical artists such as Lauren Alaina looked back wistfully on a decade when “the ladies dominated” the radio airwaves. The Washington Post reported in 2019 that immersive nostalgic experiences such as the “No Scrubs: ’90s Dance Party” and the R&B-focused “Nostalgia: The ’90s Experience” had become successful franchises.

“People become nostalgic in response to adversity or psychologically negative states,” the British researcher Jacob Juhl told the Post. “Nostalgia,” Juhl continued, “helps restore people to a psychological equilibrium.”

But there are those among us for whom any kind of escapism is a moral calamity—a way of avoiding one’s ethical duty to remain vigilant about the omnipresence of evil. No psychic comfort blanket for you, not when there’s a new moral imperative to devote ourselves wholly to the advancement of social justice. The social-justice warriors have helped give birth to a backlash against the romantic reflections on that mixed bag of a decade, as expressed through cultural products that appear to traffic in the same nostalgia—only to reverse field and attack the past for having brought us to our present crisis.

In 2021, a variety of explosive cultural projects trained their fire on happy memories of the 1990s with the explicit intention of popularizing puritanical critiques of the period’s hedonism, consumerism, and social irresponsibility. Arguably the most popular: HBO’s July 2021 documentary, Woodstock 99: Peace, Love, and Rage. Director Garret Price’s portrait of a shambolic three-day music festival transforms it into a metaphor for all that was wrong with the decade, indicting almost everyone who lived through it in the process.

In Price’s telling, Woodstock 99 was not just one of many massive outdoor concerts that went wrong. It wasn’t just another show with an incoherent lineup, terrible infrastructure, lax security, violent attendees, and avaricious promoters. No, it was a portent of a grim future in which a plague of entitled middle-class white men would lash out against an enlightened progressive future, and who would eventually produce the greatest of all evils: Donald Trump’s presidency.

The documentary focuses on a handful of events, among them a moment when we see the late rapper DMX leading the audience in a call-and-response session during a song whose chorus includes (like so many popular mainstream songs of the period) an unspeakable ethnic slur. “And what’s so chilling about it,” New York Times critic Wesley Morris tells Price about the largely white audience, “they were ready to do it. Like, hoping that he would do this song.”

This casual racial naiveté wasn’t the only thing to presage a darker era, according to the documentary and its commentators. Also concerning were regular displays of male chauvinism and the mistreatment of women. The festival was typified by a staggering amount of public nudity and an equally appalling number of abuses of semi-clothed women by male attendees. “The degree to which exploitation of women was not only excused but formalized,” music journalist Steven Hyden says during the documentary, “created an environment where people felt that exploiting women, abusing women, hurting women was going to be okay.” We are to view this not as a by-product of the festival’s atmosphere but as an example of the diseased culture of the decade as a whole.

The documentary explicitly links the conduct at Woodstock 99 with the popularity of the porn franchise called Girls Gone Wild and the objectification of women in the American Pie movie series. This is what happens, we are being told, when society caters to what Hyden calls the “dark energy coming from young, white males.” Woodstock 99 largely suggests this lascivious and misogynistic behavior was universally accepted at the festival, though it does include footage of Dexter Holland, the lead singer of the band The Offspring, admonishing the crowd for taking physical liberties with the half-naked women passing overhead.

The account goes on to present the viewer with profiles of the two young men who murdered their teachers and classmates at Columbine High School in 1999—presumably, fans of the “nu metal” musical

### Commentary

The social-justice warriors have helped give birth to a backlash against the romantic reflections on the 1990s, that mixed bag of a decade.
acts that dominated Woodstock 99’s stages. This introduces us to one of the documentary’s truest villains: the white rapper-singer-songwriter Kid Rock.

Adorned in an oversized white fur coat and ornamented with ostentatious jewelry, he symbolized the “simmering anger” (Wesley Morris’s words) over class divisions in the United States that had gone underrecognized in the 1990s. And he did so while being a cultural appropriator: “This is a country that is basically forged in white people impersonating black people,” Morris says. Worst of all, Kid Rock expressed a fashionable misogyny when he described President Bill Clinton as a “pimp” and the White House intern he took advantage of as a “ho.”

What Morris doesn’t say is that this narrative was fashionable because Democrats and their allies in media made it into a fashion. At the time, Maureen Dowd thought nothing of deeming Monica Lewinsky a “ditzy, predatory White House intern,” a girl “who was too tubby to be in the high school ‘in’ crowd.” Indeed, Dowd’s “fresh and insightful columns on the impact of President Clinton’s affair” won her a Pulitzer.

In point of fact, the voices bemoaning the vulgarity, crassness, and ugliness of American popular culture and its depiction of women back in the day were almost exclusively conservative or Republican. At one point in Woodstock 99, we see footage of Fox News host Bill O’Reilly lamenting the “corrosive effects of the music world on children.” Senator Sam Brownback is shown saying that “if Hitler or Mussolini were alive, they’d have to be rock stars.” America’s young adults “have not been acculturated with the [proper] kind of gentlemanliness and gentlewomanliness, not inculcated with religious faith and discipline, maybe [they have] a lack of values or whatever,” former senator Jeff Sessions mourned in a speech that blamed complex cultural conditions for the “destructive path” on which the nation’s kids had embarked. Newt Gingrich did not appeal to euphemisms when he blamed American social decadence and its liberal promoters for the bloodshed in Colorado. “I accuse you in Littleton,” Gingrich declared, directing his recrimination toward the “elite” in media, academia, and politics. These professions are “undermining the core values of civility,” and it’s “time they were stopped.”

And what do the documentary’s talking heads say about this? Not that the hyperventilating prudery on display was hopelessly out of touch with the public, or that the rapid pace of America’s cultural evolution had left the American right in the dust. Merely that the right wing of the time was guilty of oversimplifying an otherwise valuable social critique.

Woodstock 99 concludes its denunciation of the festival’s devolution from an immoral spectacle into a reptilian mob by linking that concert to the cultural forces that produced Donald Trump’s presidency. “There’s a definite umbilical cord between the dark, sexual, cultural, political underbelly in the country at that time to where we are now,” insists one of its talking heads, journalist Maureen Callahan.

A ten-episode Vice TV series, The Dark Side of the ’90s, draws a similar conclusion: Those years comprised a hedonistic horror show that rejected public morality and personal rectitude—and laid the groundwork for the Trump era. Funny, given that the name of the network on which it aired literally celebrates vice over virtue.

The series tsk-tsks over the international TV hit Baywatch, a show about lifeguards in jiggly bathing suits, for its role in making body dysmorphia a national crisis. “Baywatch helped normalize plastic surgery,” announces a talking head named Dr. Jen Goodman. “Prior to that, it was really taboo.” The program’s “obsession with body image” supposedly led to an explosion in the rates of breast-augmentation surgeries in women and contributed to a rise in the use of performance-enhancing drugs by men. Worst of all, the show’s casual objectification of women would one day be personified in Donald Trump, whose misogyny would later become a feature of his political movement.

Bracketed by two national scandals involving millenarian cults—the Branch Davidians at the beginning of the decade and Heaven’s Gate at the end—the 1990s also heralded an age of post-truth politics. “In the mid-’90s, conspiracy theories begin to go mainstream,” the program’s narrator, Sugar Ray vocalist Mark McGrath, observes.

“That was the beginning movement of the dis-
trust for the government, and that same movement has become very, very dominant in the U.S.,” author and radio host Alan Warren says, and a religion professor named Benjamin Zeller concurs: “By 2020, it was in the White House.”

Among all the cultural phenomena that have led us to such lows over the subsequent 20 years, “trash TV” features most prominently on The Dark Side of the ’90s (which, again, appears on a network called Vice). It was in this era that daytime talk programming began to mimic the “touring vaudeville freak shows of the 1930s,” according to AV Club writer Katie Rife. Panel programs played regular hosts to racial antagonism, bizarre kinks, titillating scandals, and, above all, physical fights. Shows hosted by Jenny Jones, Sally Jessy Raphael, Maury Povich, and Jerry Springer all “dramatized a coarseness that was pervading society,” says media journalist Robert Feder.

By the end of the decade, the program’s narrator adds, “the exact same DNA as trash TV” had given way to reality television. And reality television soon handed a powerful microphone to Donald Trump, star of The Apprentice. “There’s a lot of things that go into the mix of a cultural system that would end up electing a reality star as a president,” one Jerry Springer Show producer complains. “Everything is sort confrontational, loud, in-your-face. Reality television might have given him a platform for that.”

All this is true. Republicans and conservatives with a living memory of this decade know it to be true because they were the lonely few indicting the decade’s cultural and moral vacuity. At the time, however, their sermonizing was not well received by the arbitrators of cultural discourse. “Talk-show guests are average Americans. George Will need not apply,” Baltimore Sun columnist Ted Rall mused in 1996 amid the “Christian fundamentalist” backlash against tabloid talk programming. “If the Bible-thumpers and the white-wine-and-brie set have their way, the only discussion we’ll have as a society will concern the Federal Reserve discount rate.”

That same year, Republican presidential nominee Bob Dole denounced one of the more popular, albeit unhealthy, ideal body images among young women: The so-called heroin chic aesthetic popularized by fashion icons such as Kate Moss. It’s a look, he said, that contributes to “a false and deadly message to America’s youth that drugs are harmless fun.” For this he was mercilessly pilloried in pop-cultural venues.

O
F COURSE, the events of the 1990s did pave the way for Trump’s presidency, in the way that all events indirectly beget what follows. But that decade was directly responsible for a set of
political circumstances that made moral relativism the common currency of the cultural elite.

Sensational spectacles such as the O.J. Simpson trial, Bill Clinton's dalliances, professional baseball's drug-abuse scandals, the exploitation of Pamela Anderson and Tommy Lee's burgled sex tape, and half a dozen other titillating passions that gripped the nation were surely signs of a broader ethical decay. But discussions of that decay were left to those who were willing to pay the associated price in social and political capital.

On the left, entertaining media products that do not serve a grander political purpose are perceived to be at odds with the promotion of a virtuous society.

Anyone who gave voice to that observation invited the accusation that he was a censorious prude seeking to impose Christian theocracy on secular society.

The 1990s were a period in which women were objectified, and many were abused by powerful men in a variety of industries. It was a time when loose morals were celebrated and degeneracy in the pursuit of self-gratification was lionized. It was typified by profligacy and waste, and the inheritors of America's historical good fortune were reckless in its stewardship. It was a decade in which crassness was miscast as art and promiscuity was promoted as liberating.

But even to countenance many of these critiques at the time was to be accused of standing athwart America's cultural evolution. Today, the right's mora-листical critiques of the '90s are being ratified by the trendsetters of the modern left.

On the left, entertaining media products that do not serve a grander political purpose are perceived to be at odds with the promotion of a virtuous society. NPR's television critic Eric Deggans advised socially conscious media consumers to “seek out films and TV shows which will challenge your notions of race and culture” over the banal amusements that exist only to distract the public with escapist entertainment.

Classic literary works that traffic in dated cultural stereotypes and explore moral ambiguity are being suppressed by their custodians in favor of texts that advance a more modern ethical framework. As Georgia-based high-school librarian Andy Spinks told the School Library Journal, “problematic texts” such as The Adventures of Huckleberry Fin, To Kill a Mockingbird, and anything by Laura Ingalls Wilder “meet the criteria for weeding” out of the curriculum.

Cartoons that transgress against modern cultural covenants, such as ensuring that characters with an identifiable race are voiced by actors who share that race or stigmatizing the promotion of “the good-cop archetype” (as Times reporter Amanda Hess declared in a bizarre anti-cop backlash against the kiddie cartoon Paw Patrol), are to be circumscribed for your own good.

Even sex for the sake of self-indulgence alone is increasingly regarded as an attack on the social fabric. Sexual lifestyle choices are being redefined as “quietly revolutionary” acts, according to Quartz reporter Olivia Goldhill—that is, when sex is had at all. New York Times columnist Ezra Klein favorably observed that state-level laws codifying consent are designed so young men will “feel a cold spike of fear when they begin a sexual encounter.” That seems to have been the intended effect.

“For most heterosexual men, the fear of doing consent wrong and unintentionally assaulting some- one is deeply held and part of their everyday experience of sex,” the progressives at Teen Vogue conceded. After all, as Moira Donegan, the creator of the “Shitty Media Men” list, observed, it “should not be hard to say that heterosexuality as it is practiced is a raw deal for women and that much pornography eroticizes the contempt of women.” An unsurprising result of this intimidation campaign has been a dramatic increase in the number of Americans aged 18 to 29 who describe themselves as sexless.

The rediscovery of enduring ethical precepts that promote a common culture and a well-ordered society isn’t a wholly undesirable development, even if it has been accompanied by spasmodic moral pan- ics about the degenerate cultural fare that Americans amuse themselves with. The spectacle that the moralizing left has made of itself, however, inadvertently rehabilitates the religious right.

“This too we want for America: moral clarity in our culture and ethical leadership in the White House,” the GOP’s 1996 party platform read. “It matters greatly that our leaders reflect and communicate those values, not undermine or mock them.” Those appeals to moral authority could appear today verbatim on any number of progressive Twitter feeds. The only difference is that those progressives don’t have a libertine, perjurious president whom they decided they needed to protect from the consequences of his own actions. In the end, they unwittingly created a pathway to power for another libertine, perjurious president whom they fear and revile and wish to destroy.
Among the Elect

**Woke Racism:**
*How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America*

By John McWhorter
Portfolio, 224 pages

Reviewed by Abe Greenwald

If the United States manages to put down the woke revolution, it will be because a critical mass of liberals chooses to reject it. Conservatives, opposed to wokeness from the start, can make arguments and stand up for their principles individually. But they can’t stop the liberal-to-woke conversion process that turns mildly left-of-center Americans into cosplay Black Panthers overnight. The liberals themselves are the gatekeepers of their own movement and its institutions. Given that these institutions—news media, social media, entertainment, academia, and the current majority party in Washington—shape so many aspects of American life, it’s mostly up to liberals to halt and reverse the transformation of the country.

Among the dozen or so prominent liberals who have answered this call, John McWhorter has taken on an invaluable role. McWhorter, a linguistics professor at Columbia University, is less consumed with particular woke-inspired outrages than with getting at the substance of wokeness itself and the threat it poses to his fellow black Americans. On those matters, his new book, *Woke Racism*, makes several major contributions.

First, it’s not pitched at the woke. McWhorter is done with them. “Our current conversations waste massive amounts of energy by missing the futility of ‘dialogue’ with them,” he writes. No one can be argued out of wokeness and, just as crucially, McWhorter wants to get to liberals—black and white—before they’re irretrievably lost to the impenetrable mob: “I want to reach those on the fence, guilted into attention by these ideologues’ passion and rhetoric but unable to disregard their true inner compass.”

McWhorter also argues that wokeness is insulting to and catastrophic for black Americans. By the lights of the woke, he says, “white people calling themselves our saviors make black people look like the dumbest, weakest, most self-indulgent human beings in the history of our species, and teach black people to revel in that status and cherish it as making us special.”

Despite the book’s title, McWhorter dispenses with the term *woke* altogether. Borrowing, with acknowledgment, from the conservative writer Joseph Bottum, he deems the woke “the Elect.”

*Abe Greenwald is executive editor of Commentary.*
The cords of logic that connect John McWhorter’s insights all spring from his air-tight case for Electism as a religion. Because of this, Woke Racism is an outstanding, paradigm-shifting success.

For example, the ecstatic response to Ta-Nehisi Coates’s 2014 essay “The Case for Reparations.” People loved Coates’s article not as politics,” McWhorter writes. It was taken, instead, “as a sermon.” The clergy must continue to pump out such sermons lest the “superstitious, non-empirical wing” of the movement become distracted by earthly matters.

It will come as no surprise to anyone who’s opened a Web browser in the past two years that the Elect’s original sin is “white privilege.” Like the Christian concept of original sin, McWhorter cleverly notes, this one comes “complete with ineradicability.” Confess, by all means. Self-flagellate, too. But you can never truly atone for whiteness.

McWhorter says that Electism is apocalyptic, in the sense that its adherents speak constantly of a day of racial reckoning for America. He could have gone a bit further here and made his point even sharper. Since the killing of George Floyd, the Elect (McWhorter makes it hard to resist the term) have spoken time and time again of tearing down the entire American political and financial system and replacing it with a social-justice paradise. He’s right when he says that Electism adheres to an Abrahamic narrative of a perfect past, a broken present, and a heavenly future. “Under the Elect, black people’s noble past is Africa,” he writes. “The glorious future is about those terms that we will come to; while the present, if the religion is to make any kind of sense, must always be a cesspool.”

It should be self-evident that Electism is an evangelical faith. If it weren’t, there would be little need for this book. It’s similarly plain to see that the Elect go after heretics.

Finally, Electism, like other successful faiths, is supplanting older religions. McWhorter offers the example of a pastor at the Church of St. Francis Xavier in New York City who “led vows addressing white privilege and racial justice, melding Catholicism and Electism on the level of personal testimony in a fashion much more reminiscent of White Fragility than Dorothy Day,” the Catholic activist who practically invented the idea of “social justice.” (The repurposing of an ancient religion for the same ends has been such a notable feature of Jewish worship over the past few years that one suspects McWhorter left it out of his book only because he didn’t know where to begin.)

The cords of logic that connect McWhorter’s insights throughout the book all spring from his air-tight case for Electism as a religion. Because of this, Woke Racism is an outstanding, paradigm-shifting success. What this makes clear is that when you know you’re dealing
with a religious believer and not a political activist, many things fall into place. You’re unlikely to get anywhere arguing with the Elect because you can’t argue a believer out of his faith. Similarly, fence-sitting liberals are made uneasy by the claims of Electism because such claims make sense only within a specific religious paradigm. Getting a professor fired for saying “All Lives Matter” has zero practical benefit for any African American. But if you launch a successful witch hunt of that sort, you satisfy Electism’s religious requirement to keep America’s original sin, white privilege, ever prominent in your mind.

And that—ruminating on the evil of white privilege—is the goal of all Electism’s work. It’s not about policies that would correct racial injustices. We know from years of hard data that the policies the Elect propose do great harm to African Americans. Defunding police means more murdered black people. Extreme affirmative action means fewer black students making the honor roll. Easing up on conduct standards in public schools means fewer black children getting an education.

And it’s not about broadcasting an understanding of race relations that makes people of color feel safer. First off, no one is made unsafe by the thoughts in your head. Second, behaviors that make people unsafe—harassment and workplace discrimination—are already crimes. Third, by the logic of Electism, people of color can never feel safe around whites because white privilege is a permanent phenomenon. More critical still, the worldview that Electism fosters is plainly racist and directly harmful to blacks. McWhorter writes of the Elect who give the New York Times’ Nikole Hannah-Jones a pass on her faulty history: “They are condescending to a black woman who deserves better, even if the zeitgeist she has been minted in prevents her from knowing it herself.”

But the well-being of Hannah-Jones or of African Americans in general isn’t really what matters to the Elect. What matters is fulfilling a religious obligation to expose at all turns a phantasmagoric force called white privilege. They are, as McWhorter calls them, “medievals with lattes.”

What would genuinely help those black Americans who suffer from the destructive and complicated modern-day consequences of slavery and Jim Crow? McWhorter offers a short list of policy ideas: 1) end the war on drugs; 2) teach kids from homes where little reading is done to read with phonics; and 3) boost vocational training and stop promoting college for everyone. There’s very good sense in some of this and there’s also much to quibble with. But it’s not theology posing as politics. And we will have a full airing of real-world policy arguments only when the superstitious mob loses its grip on liberal America.

The Resistance Liar

**Midnight in Washington: How We Almost Lost Our Democracy and Still Could**

*By Adam Schiff*

Random House, 484 pages

**Reviewed by Eli Lake**

A DAM SCHIFF was one of the star attractions at Donald Trump’s first impeachment trial. In his role as one of the House impeachment managers, Schiff pressed his case on the Senate floor by summoning an earnest indignation. He would at times get hoarse and weary. He would jab the air and lower his voice. He was a showman playing the role of a statesman.

The bulk of Schiff’s new memoir, *Midnight in Washington*, focuses on the scandal that erupted when President Trump sought to pressure Ukraine into investigating Joe Biden’s son Hunter. The whole affair was a gift from heaven for the Democratic congressman who represents Burbank, California. Schiff claimed to be in possession of evidence proving that Trump’s 2016 campaign conspired with Russia. When special prosecutor Robert Mueller’s investigation yielded no evidence of such a conspiracy, Schiff looked ridiculous—the supposedly dogged prosecutor had suddenly become the boy who cried collusion.

Then the House Intelligence Committee, of which Schiff became chairman in 2019, received a whistleblower’s complaint that alleged a sordid scheme to strong-arm the new Ukrainian president into cooperating with Trump crony Rudy Giuliani’s “investigation” of Hunter Biden. Schiff’s career was revived. And this time, he had the goods.
We never learn the identity of the whistleblower Schiff once promised would testify. Nor does Schiff acknowledge that Hunter Biden did indeed entangle himself in seedy foreign dealings. But he does share details of the sheepish conversation he had with reporter Sam Stein, during which he had to walk back his earlier comment that the whistleblower had not had contact with the House Intelligence Committee he chairs.

“I had been thinking about securing the whistleblower’s testimony before the committee, not any prior contact with my staff,” he recalls telling Stein. “But I screwed up and wanted him to know it.” As Schiff hung up the phone, he felt sick to his stomach, he says.

This passage gives the reader the false impression that Schiff is reflective and honest about his mistakes. But it’s best to read this admission as calculated contrition. For most of his memoir, Schiff writes as though he actually did reveal a Donald Trump–Russia collusion scandal—and he ignores the ample public evidence of its debunking.

Schiff makes no mention of Michael Horowitz, the FBI inspector general who uncovered abuses so grave in his agency’s surveillance of former Trump campaign aide Carter Page that the secret court which had granted the bureau’s four surveillance warrants withdrew three of them. Schiff and his committee’s Democrats waged an 18-month campaign to defend the surveillance of Page, claiming without evidence that it was his Republican counterpart, Devin Nunes, who had misrepresented the classified record.

Then there is the matter of the Trump-Russia conspiracy itself. Schiff now maintains that his committee and other investigations did find collusion, but that Mueller failed to find enough evidence to prosecute the Trump campaign (or any U.S. citizen, for that matter) for conspiring with the Kremlin’s election interference.

“The president’s campaign could, and did, try to collude with the Russians to get help in the election,” he says in explaining why he declined to apologize for his earlier accusations in an interview with ABC News’s George Stephanopoulos. “Whether Mueller believed he could satisfy a jury that all of the elements of the crime of conspiracy had been met was another matter, and that would be up to him.”

Schiff’s argument rests primarily on a meeting that took place in New York’s Trump Tower in 2016. Donald Trump Jr., Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner, and campaign manager Paul Manafort all met with a delegation led by a Russian lawyer named Natalia Veselnitskaya. Emails between Don Jr. and a British promoter revealed that Veselnitskaya had promised dirt on Hillary Clinton and that Don Jr. had been receptive to hearing her out.

Schiff describes Veselnitskaya as someone with “ties to senior Kremlin officials but no official role.” He says she made her approach as a way for Moscow to determine whether Trump’s campaign would be open to cooperation down the road. Schiff neglects to mention that Veselnitskaya had been lobbying the U.S. government for years to roll back human-rights sanctions on officials tied to the imprisonment and death of the Russian lawyer Sergei Magnitsky. The dirt she provided to the Trump campaign, as I wrote in COMMENTARY’s January 2021 issue, was provided not by Russian spies but by American opposition researchers working for the firm Fusion GPS.* In the end, the meeting had nothing to do with enlisting the Trump campaign in Russia’s hacking or social-media campaign; it was about gaining Trump’s support for lifting the Magnitsky sanctions.

Fusion GPS was the same firm that contracted the retired British spy Christopher Steele to develop the infamous dossier that alleged the Trump campaign had struck a foul bargain with Russia. Fusion did so on behalf of the Democrats. In 2017, Schiff ran wild with the Steele dossier. During the hearing when then-FBI director James Comey confirmed the existence of an FBI investigation into Trump’s campaign, Schiff asked Comey about several claims Steele had made. Schiff specifically zeroed in on Page and the now-discredited allegation that Page had been offered 19 percent ownership of the Russian gas concern Rosneft dur-

For most of his memoir, Midnight in Washington, Adam Schiff writes as though he actually did reveal a Donald Trump–Russia collusion scandal—and he ignores the ample public evidence of its debunking.

* “Framed and Guilty,” COMMENTARY, January 2021
ing a visit to Moscow in July 2016. “Here are some of the matters, drawn from public sources alone, since that is all we can discuss in this setting, that concern us and should concern all Americans,” is how Schiff qualified his remarks at the time. In this way, Schiff gave the impression that he knew more than he could say in public because the evidence in question was classified. He continued to play this game for the next two years, claiming in media interviews that he had “more than circumstantial evidence” of collusion. But in fact, Schiff didn’t know anything more. In 2020, the Trump administration declassified the transcripts of depositions given to the House Intelligence Committee. Every witness had been asked whether or not he or she had seen evidence of collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia. None of them—not James Clapper, not Sally Yates, not Susan Rice—said they did. Schiff never accounts for the gulf between what witnesses told his committee behind closed doors and what he claimed to know before the cameras.

This is a shame. A more honest author would have pondered how his prevarications on the matter of Russian collusion ended up damaging his case with Republicans when it came to Trump’s impeachment for pressuring Ukraine. A more honest author might have taken a few pages to apologize to Carter Page and others he falsely accused. Doing so would have given some crediblity to the parts of his narrative about Trump’s very real threats to our republic. But Schiff is a resistance leader, not a truth-teller, and he knows the likely audience for his book will overlook a few fibs and elisions for the greater cause of defeating the orange menace.

What Schiff and his admirers do not understand is that in their resistance, they are simply mirror images of Trump’s supporters. In 2016, Michael Anton said the choice between Trump and Hillary Clinton constituted the “Flight 93 election”—meaning that true conservatives had no choice but to support a deeply flawed candidate because the republic was on the verge of extinction. That formulation gave Trump’s supporters permission to explain away his lies and cruelty because the alternative would be so much worse.

The difference between Anton’s nonsense and Schiff’s is that Schiff doesn’t acknowledge the bargain he has struck. He ends his book lamenting the perils of a political culture in which different parties cannot agree on basic facts: “In the absence of that shared understanding—if indeed each party is entitled to its own alternative facts—then what basis is left for judging the merits of any particular agenda or platform? If everything could be true, then nothing is true.” In the end, then, Schiff is describing a problem he helped create.

Squirrel Hill: The Tree of Life Synagogue Shooting and the Soul of a Neighborhood
By Mark Oppenheimer
Knopf, 320 pages

Reviewed by Charles Fain Lehman

ONE of the most striking features of Pittsburgh’s Squirrel Hill neighborhood is the seamlessness of its Jewishness. On two blocks of the main drag, one finds a Starbucks, a handful of Chinese restaurants, a library, and a smattering of local businesses—standard fare. But there is also a mikveh, a Jewish day school, two synagogues, and a fully kosher Dunkin’ Donuts (one of just 13 outside of the New York City area). There are Jews in black hats, Jews in kippahs, Zionist Jews, Bend the Arc Jews, and at least one self-identified Jewish “priestess.” The institutions of ancient, religious Judaism stand side by side with the trappings of the modern, liberal Jew. “In other American cities with a sizable Jewish population, the Orthodox would likely have their own enclave, the secular Jews would be scattered around town, and most of the Jews, certainly the non-Orthodox ones, would have gone to one suburb or another,” the journalist Mark Oppenheimer writes. “Such a Jewish community exists nowhere else in the United States.”

This neighborhood and its residents are the focus of Oppenheimer’s new book, the aptly titled Squirrel Hill. In a series of vignettes, the Tablet editor and Yale lecturer tells the story of the 2018 shooting at Squirrel Hill’s Tree of Life Synagogue, the deadliest anti-Semitic attack in American history. Through his meticulous reporting, Oppenheimer documents how the shooting affected this uniquely Jewish community, forcing Pittsburgh’s Jews to really consider what
it means to be Jewish. In so doing, Oppenheimer invites his readers to do the same.

The book begins with the attack itself, as Oppenheimer reconstructs that day in a few moving chapters. His focus is primarily on the people inside, the handful who decided to turn up for an otherwise unremarkable Shabbat morning at one of the three congregations (Tree of Life–Or L'Simcha, Dor Hadash, and New Light) that gathered under the one roof.

That group was exactly the sort you would expect to find at services on a given Saturday: the “mix of the most committed Jews and the Jews with no place else to go, the widowed or disabled or simply lonely, who wake up early and can’t wait to see other people.” Tree of Life and New Light are Conservative synagogues, while Dor Hadash is affiliated with the Reconstructionist movement—both denominations in demographic decline. If the shooter had targeted one of Squirrel Hill’s major Orthodox synagogues, Oppenheimer notes, he could have killed hundreds.

Part of what made the Tree of Life shooting shocking was that it showed that anti-Semitism was still a mortal danger, even in America. In a vibrantly Jewish neighborhood, in the country (besides Israel) most unequivocally welcoming to Jews, 11 people could still be murdered simply because they were Jewish. But that the attack happened at a once-thriving, now-shrinking synagogue raises an opposite point: Many people did not die that weekend precisely because they were not the sort of person to show up to weekly services. It forces readers to ponder what it means that the people most committed to Jewish practice were also, thereby, the people most at risk of anti-Semitic violence. How do we balance a desire to be fully Jewish against the hostility that engenders? Is it possible to be both fully Jewish and fully American?

The rest of Squirrel Hill, as it spirals out from the shooting to its effects on the greater community, depicts a community grappling with this and other questions of Jewish identity. How should Jews deal with death? What are our political obligations in life? What are our obligations to our personal community, versus those to everyone else? And at the core of it: If anti-Semitism will never go away, why choose to be Jewish?

The Tree of Life shooting quickly became, as so many tragedies unfortunately now do, a media and political spectacle. Squirrel Hill is not a polemic, but Oppenheimer dutifully documents the debates over gun control and white nationalism that sprang up in the shooting’s wake, particularly after then-president Donald Trump decided to pay a visit to Pittsburgh, prompting a protest and social-media outrage.

But even there, the focus is not so much the policy issues as how the Jewish community thinks about them. On the one hand, it can be easy to feel that being Jewish requires being a Democrat, that in some conversations tikkkun olam is just a shorter way to say “Black Lives Matter.” At the same time, three in four Orthodox Jews are Republicans, and most supported Trump. When Oppenheimer interviews members of Pittsburgh’s Bend the Arc affiliate, he also takes time to talk to the Orthodox woman who spent the day of the protest heckling participants. The point is not to approximate neutrality, but to ensure a complete picture of Squirrel Hill’s diversity.

Oppenheimer also looks outside Pittsburgh’s Jewish community, documenting the challenges of “tragedy tourism” as the well-intentioned flooded the city after the shooting. And he uses his coverage of Taylor Allderdice, Squirrel Hill’s main public high school, to probe the feelings of its black students, many of whom express resentment that the death of Jews garners more attention than the death of blacks.

After those on the shooting itself, Squirrel Hill’s most stirring chapters cover the process of burying the 11 victims. Oppenheimer details how one of the local Orthodox rabbis organized a group to keep watch over the bodies until they were released by the FBI, praying psalms through the night until the dead could be returned to the community. From there, many were cared for by Pittsburgh’s liberal Chevra Kadisha (a Jewish burial society), which oversaw the ritual washing of bodies that precedes a funeral. Then, finally, the funerals, where one local Reform Rabbi found himself drawn, as by magnetism, to walk alongside Orthodox funeral processors who had come to walk alongside the hearse, the two communities joined together in mourning.

Squirrel Hill is a book for Jews (and Gentiles) everywhere, but it is particularly a book for those of us who grew up Jewish in Pittsburgh. (The house where I grew up is a 15-minute walk from Tree of Life, although we were members of the larger Reform synagogue, Temple Sinai.) Fellow residents, both former and current, will recognize many of the places and names; at one point in the book I paused, read aloud a passage Oppenheimer transcribed from a Jewish journalist’s recounting of her work with the city’s liberal Chevra Kadisha, and then told my wife that I had had a crush on said writer for most of elementary school.

In that regard, Squirrel Hill showed me how unusual the neighborhood was as a place to grow up. Being raised Jewish in Pittsburgh is
a bit like how Oppenheimer’s podcast co-host Liel Leibovitz recently described being Jewish in Israel: “You are Jewish by osmosis. You just open the window and breathe in a lot of Jew.” It offers what Oppenheimer describes as “an idyllic Jewish life in a modern urban shtetl”—so if the dream of being fully Jewish and fully American is possible anywhere, it’s there.

But it is all too easy—in Squirrel Hill, and in modern liberal Jewish life—for Jewish identity to stop being a choice, for it to become something that happens to us but to which we do not contribute. I grew up unselfconsciously Jewish because of the environment in which I lived. It was only after I left Squirrel Hill (and after I fell in love with a non-Jewish woman and spent years watching her work on conversion for her and our son) that I began to understand that for most American Jews, being Jewish is not something you “breathe in”—it’s something you choose, or don’t choose, every day.

The choice to be willfully, deliberately Jewish always means accepting the risks that go with it—of anti-Semitism that can be subtle and, in its violent expressions, unsubtle. A place like Squirrel Hill hints at a world in which being Jewish is easy and free from fear, but the Tree of Life shooting shows that even there it is not.

That’s why the best stories in Squirrel Hill are those of people who, face-to-face with the scourge of anti-Semitism, chose to become more Jewish, rather than less. There’s Lynn Hyde, married to a Jewish man but who had always stopped short of converting—until she realized that if the shooter had entered the synagogue where she and her husband were praying, he wouldn’t have bothered to ask if she wasn’t Jewish before shooting her. Or Robert Zacharias, the computer artist who responded to the shooting by starting to wear a kippah everywhere he goes and grappling with all the discomfort that being publicly and visibly Jewish brings. Even Ron Symons, the Reform rabbi who walked with his Orthodox brothers during the funeral procession, captures this: In mourning another Jew, we are all Jewish together.

These stories and others are the closest thing Squirrel Hill offers as an answer to the question it poses.

Poverty Isn’t the Problem

Invisible Child: Poverty, Survival & Hope in an American City
By Andrea Elliott
Random House, 602 pages

Reviewed by Naomi Schaefer Riley

When I left the house, that’s when everything started happening....

When I was in the house, did the kids get taken away? No. When I was in the house, did my mom get kicked out of the house? No. When I left the house, this is what happened. This is why I did not want to come to this dumb school.”

Of all the distressing moments in Invisible Child, Andrea Elliott’s book about Dasani Coates, the oldest of eight children growing up in a homeless shelter in New York City, this is the most heartbreaking. Having finally escaped her chaotic background and now safely ensconced at the Hershey School (a boarding school for underprivileged kids), Dasani blames herself for the fact that her younger siblings were sent to foster care after she left home.

To state the obvious, this was not Dasani’s fault. She had essentially been raising her younger siblings. They included one younger sister whom her mother Chanel had had with Dasani’s father, and six other children born to her mother and her stepfather, Supreme. When she was with her family, Dasani was in charge of feeding the baby, bringing the younger children to school and appointments, and cleaning their space at the shelter, among many other responsibilities. She

Commentary

49
had, in the words of experts, become “parentified.” And so she felt guilty for the fact that in her absence her family fell apart.

Dasani’s story first came to light in 2012 when Elliott, a reporter at the New York Times, wrote about her and her family—and, in particular, the deplorable conditions at the homeless shelter where they were living in Brooklyn. In addition to vermin and mold and the fact that 10 people were living in a single room, sexual assaults were taking place in the restrooms. To avoid the danger, the children urinated in a bucket during the night. Using video cameras she gave to the family, Elliott was able to get a view into a shelter that barred outsiders from entering.

Readers of these stories and the politicians who represented those readers were outraged and vowed change. Then Mayor-elect Bill de Blasio promised to “get to work on this right away.” And Letitia James, who was then the city’s public advocate and is now the state’s attorney general, said that Dasani “put the face of poverty... on the front page of the New York Times.”

But whether Dasani is a face of poverty or a representative of something else is a question that should occur to any reader of Invisible Child. Elliott has a habit of describing certain problems, like the shelter conditions, in lurid detail—“the mice used to terrorize Dasani, leaving pellets and bite marks.” But when it comes to, say, the violence that takes place between Dasani’s mother and stepfather, she uses language that is far more abstracted: “His anger would rise until it burst like thunder... Over time, he lost all decorum, fighting back as if Chanel were a man. They went blind in such moments. Their words flew, their bodies crashed. Dasani learned to hustle the children into a corner.”

Elliott says she wanted to write a book that was focused on the children, but after she describes these incidents of domestic violence, we don’t hear Dasani’s reaction. Instead, Elliott describes how investigators from the Administration of Children’s Services show up looking for signs of abuse or neglect of the kids. And we are told that the stepfather, Supreme, is traumatized: “As he stood there in the lobby [of ACS], the memory came rushing back. He was nine years old. His sister had just died. His parents were under investigation and he was about to be separated from his three brothers.”

It is, of course, important to note that such violence is often repeated in one generation after the next. But rather than observing how another generation of children is being scarred by the behavior of their parents, Elliott instead portrays them as being scarred by child-protection agencies.

Similarly, Elliott suggests throughout the book that Chanel and Supreme and their children are trapped in present-day poverty because of the past. She ascribes the difficult conditions under which many black families in this country live today to discrimination experienced in previous generations. That may be true, but it’s not sufficient, and it is disappointing to see how a reporter with deep wells of curiosity and striking powers of observation defaults to a copy-and-paste approach to so many policy questions.

Because of the informal lending restrictions known as “redlining,” among other things, “white American families would eventually amass a median net worth nearly ten times that of black families,” Elliott writes. “Put another way, the exclusion of African-Americans from real estate—not to mention college, white-collar jobs, and the ability to vote—laid the foundation of a lasting poverty that Dasani would inherit.”

If only Dasani’s family had money, Elliott implies throughout her meticulously reported work, they would have been fine, or at least better. Dasani’s mother and stepfather would have been able to care for Dasani and her seven siblings. They would have been able to find a stable place to live and feed their children. That would have presumably enabled them to stop stealing clothing and other items, and that would have allowed them to pass criminal background checks and get jobs. And all of this would have ensured that the Administration for Children’s Services would have never removed their children from their custody.

Which is why it’s so jarring to
find out 50 pages later that Dasani’s mother inherited $49,000 when her own mother died. Did that change the life of Dasani’s family? For a brief moment, it seems. They moved out of the homeless shelter system and into subsidized housing. But then things quickly spiraled out of control. And as a careful reader will learn again and again in Invisible Child, poverty is not the root of the problems in Dasani’s family—and simply giving them money is no solution.

Elliott acknowledges this—sort of. She notes that “money could only be useful if they knew how to spend it. To think that it would bring salvation was like asking a set of keys to drive a car.” But in that case, why does Elliott spend so much time dwelling on income inequality, on the black-white wealth gap, on how Michael Bloomberg (who was mayor when she published the articles from which this book has sprung) has too much money and spent his private wealth on renovating Gracie Mansion while Chanel always seems to be down to her last dime?

Elliott also suggests that the family’s problems with the city’s children’s services also stem from poverty. “Of 54,302 investigations opened by the agency in 2015, the vast majority—72 percent—involve allegations of neglect, which is strongly correlated to poverty. The parent has failed to provide adequate shelter, or to properly dress, feed and get the children to school, or has turned to drugs or alcohol—a common form of self-medication in a world of untreated traumas.”

The problem with this list is that it reverses cause and effect. Turning to drugs and alcohol—as a form of self-medication or anything else—is often the reason that parents are failing to dress or feed or shelter or educate or even get medical care for their children.

The public assistance programs long in place in this country (and in New York City) are substantial enough to prove that children do not lack basic necessities because of poverty. They are lacking because their parents lack the wherewithal to ask for help. In many cases, the parents don’t realize they need help. It is the nation’s continuing drug-abuse crisis—not poverty—that is driving child welfare cases.

Treating addiction is actually much more difficult than treating poverty. It is worth noting how many chances Chanel and Supreme get at the former. They enter at least a dozen different treatment programs—both residential and outpatient—and they seem to have no trouble getting into them. But no sooner do they get clean when something goes wrong and they return to using.

Elliott shows us, almost inadvertently, that poverty needn’t be a permanent state. Dasani’s grandmother Joanie escaped it. After a troubled childhood and young adulthood, marked by crime and drugs and a failure to care for the children she was raising, Elliott reports, “Chanel’s mother got clean. It happened so fast that people spoke of it as a miracle.” She stopped using and entered a work-training program in 2000. When she was hired as a janitor in the subway system, she told her daughter, “This is the happiest day of my life.”

As hard as the work was—and Elliott describes the ways her supervisors didn’t give her enough days off when her body began to fail her—Joanie used her salary to help out her grandchildren when she could. And she died with almost $300,000 to her name—which is where Chanel got her inheritance. For all of Elliott’s criticisms of the heartless welfare reforms of the 1990s and the welfare-to-work programs pioneered by Rudy Giuliani and Mike Bloomberg, it turns out that if you’re not on drugs, they can be pretty successful.

And Elliott also reveals, maybe in spite of her intentions, why welfare reform was necessary and how previous policies actually created intergenerational poverty. After returning from World War II service, Dasani’s great-grandfather June did not make enough money in his various menial jobs to support his large family. His wife applied for welfare, but “this meant that June would have to leave home, he told his boss, because the government denied public aid to families with ‘a man in the house.’” This is a perfect example of how government policy led to family dissolution, not merely family dysfunction, and made it harder for families to get by.

Elliott’s list of the culprits in Dasani’s story, though, doesn’t have room for things like family dissolution. Dasani’s mother and stepfather are married, but her father is largely absent, and almost every other relative comes from a broken family. Meanwhile, Elliott oddly includes targets such as charter schools, which she says “can feel like the opposite of choice” for schools because they are “known to exclude children with learning disabilities or behavioral challenges.” She notes that if a branch of Success Academies, the city’s most effective charter-school network, was to be housed in part at Dasani’s school, its students would “enter through different doors, eat their meals apart and wear nicer uniforms.” Elliott cites flyers warning about the coming “apartheid.”

Never mind that Success is serving the kids just like Dasani in the neighborhood—and it is one of the only educational institutions in poor neighborhoods preparing kids for college and careers.

In fact, one might speculate what could have happened had Dasani had the kind of parents who...
would have entered her in the lottery for entry to Success. The vast majority of those parents are poor, too, but they want a better life for their children, and they are sober enough to plan for it. Chanel likes to talk about how she wants that for Dasani and supports her when she is admitted to the Hershey School, but she also undermines Dasani’s decision in various ways and by that point—seventh grade—even Elliott admits it may be too late for the girl.

And this, finally, is the takeaway. After more than 500 pages and almost a decade of reporting, Elliott wants us to blame the system for failing Dasani and breaking up her family. But the truth is that Dasani and her siblings probably should have been taken away from their parents a long time ago. One of her brothers is now in prison for murder. Another one has severe psychological problems and has been institutionalized off and on. Dasani left Hershey and eventually lands back with her mother in a shelter after joining a gang.

Meanwhile, her youngest sisters—who have been fostered and adopted by relatives and non-relatives—are doing the best. Nana, who plans to be a psychology major in college so she can help children, “has come to regard her childhood as dysfunctional,” Elliott writes, and quotes Nana as saying, “unfortunately, I was a kid who had no one to advocate for me.”

Throughout this beautifully observed but ideologically blinkered book, Chanel and Supreme are seen throughout this story literally yelling at caseworkers, judges, police officers, and other authorities for not giving them better housing, more food stamps, more public assistance, or for failing to remove their children from dangerous situations, but Nana is right. They were never advocating for their children.

Do We Really Need Movie Theaters?

**Did we ever?**

**By Terry Teachout**

WITH the coming of COVID, movie theaters were forced to close their doors, and their revenue streams were further devastated by the concomitant effort to use films meant for theatrical release to sell subscriptions to streaming services instead. Many predicted that they would never recover. Nor have they, at least not yet: Polls taken in mid-October 2021, 21 months into the pandemic, reported that only 51 percent of adult Americans “feel comfortable going to a movie theater right now” and that just 16 percent of Americans were “currently going to the movies.”

This development is of great concern to, among others, Martin Scorsese and Steven Spielberg, both of whom have made or are making films specifically intended for release via streaming video—but who agree that (in Spielberg’s words) “the greatest contributions we can make as filmmakers [are] to give audiences the motion-picture theatrical experience.” Spielberg adds, “I’m a firm believer that movie theaters need to be around forever.” For them, the communal ritual of seeing a film in a darkened theater in the company of strangers is an indispensable part of moviegoing, and they believe that it is now at risk, put there by a combination of COVID and, just as important, the sheer convenience of streaming.

Are they right? Yes and no. For while seeing great movies in theaters is certainly a unique and irreplaceable experience, it is in no way indispensable. Indeed, it has been superseded to a considerable degree by other movie-watching technologies—and not recently, either, but for a very long time.

MOVIES always made up a significant part of TV programming. At first, most of them were older films, but starting in 1961, NBC’s *Saturday Night at the Movies* aired recent feature films weekly, and the other TV networks followed suit. The cultural significance of these telecasts cannot be understated—it was on network TV that I first saw Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown*, Sidney Lumet’s *Fail-Safe*, and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*—but for much of America, network TV imposed limits on the public’s interests. The networks never showed “arty” films, and they steered clear of golden-age black-and-white Hollywood fare.
For those who lived in cities with multiple television channels, the story was a bit different. Local independent stations often competed during the day and late at night by running classic Hollywood films. Scorsese, who grew up in New York City, surely got his early education in cinema, watching the “Million Dollar Movie” on Channel 9, the “Late Show” on Channel 2, and “The 4:30 Movie” on Channel 7.

As for me, I grew up in a small Missouri town that had two single-screen theaters. The only “arty” films I saw there were Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey and Franco Zeffirelli’s screen version of Romeo and Juliet. Moreover, the nearest public TV station was in St. Louis, just beyond the range of our family’s rooftop antenna (this was well before cable TV). It was not until I left home that I saw any pre-1950 movies other than The Wizard of Oz. That was in 1975, when I enrolled in a small college located in a suburb of Kansas City. I had a tiny TV set in my dorm room but was too busy to watch it more than occasionally, and my school had no film series.

At that time, Kansas City was home to just two art houses, one of which showed first-run foreign films and the other revivals of popular golden-age Hollywood fare like Casablanca and Gone with the Wind. I saw no more than a handful of “classic” films in the second of those theaters, none of them more than once, and I wholly failed as a result to absorb the concept of Film as Art. For me, a classic film was a one-time event, like a fireworks display, rather than something to be experienced repeatedly, like a painting or a symphony.

What changed my point of view? The VHS videocassette recorder, which was introduced to the U.S. by JVC in 1977. Like many other Americans, I bought my first VCR six years later, right around the time that prices were coming down, and Orson Welles’s Citizen Kane and Jean Renoir’s Grand Illusion were the first ambitious films of which I owned VHS copies. I’d never seen either film, and it was thrilling to be able to view them repeatedly and at will.

Today’s Millennials cannot begin to imagine the overwhelming power of the cultural transformation wrought by the VCR. To be sure, innumerable full-fledged art films were released prior to 1983, and there was a considerable amount of good film criticism as well, but scarcely anyone could get to know a great film in anything more than a superficial way. The resulting situation was not unlike that of the proverbial tree falling in the forest: I “knew” that Kane was a great film, but I didn’t know it for myself. For me as for most people, the film canon was all about critical reputa-

Commentary
of all kinds—including their own studio-quality productions, among them Scorsese’s *The Irishman* and Joel and Ethan Coen’s *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*—available on demand. These services, which had already become popular prior to the COVID lockdown, came decisively into their own when it was no longer possible to see films in theaters. Unable to do so, large numbers of moviegoers discovered that home viewing on a reasonably large screen was a surprisingly satisfying and infinitely more convenient substitute for what Spielberg calls “the motion-picture theatrical experience.” To date, few of them seem at all inclined to venture out to see new films in theaters: As I write these words, box-office receipts for 2021 are down 70 percent from 2019.

What, if anything, are the stay-at-homes missing? To some extent, it depends on the film in question. All things being equal, it is obviously better to see a screen comedy in the presence of a responsive audience. And a wide-screen Technicolor Western like John Ford’s *The Searchers*, many of whose exteriors were shot in view of the towering sandstone buttes of Arizona’s Monument Valley, gains in a different way from being viewed on a screen big enough to suggest the immense physical scale of the place where it was filmed.

So, too, do smaller-scaled films such as *Kane* and William Wyler’s *The Best Years of Our Lives* that make use of deep-focus cinematography (in both cases by Gregg Toland), which facilitates shots composed in a complex way that is easier to appreciate when viewed on a large screen.

But does this mean that it is impossible to fully appreciate a great film without having seen it on a large screen? For all the self-evident advantages of doing so, I incline to think otherwise. Of the 32 films mentioned in the seven *Sight & Sound* critics’ polls of the greatest films of all time that have been conducted at decade-long intervals since 1952, I have seen only seven in a theater: *Kane*, *The Searchers*, 2001, *Vertigo*, *Buster Keaton’s The General*, Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather*, and Jean Renoir’s *The Rules of the Game*. Yet while my experience of classic film, as this list suggests, derives mainly from home viewing, I still regard myself as a knowledgeable and cultivated film buff, and I suspect that most people would agree.

True or not, I still believe it to be likely that even after the pandemic has finally run its course, streaming video will remain central to, perhaps even dominant in, the U.S. film industry. In addition to Amazon Prime and Netflix, both TCM and the Criterion Collection, which reissues deluxe editions of classic films on DVD, now make films available via streaming. So while there will doubtless always be a theatrical audience for blockbuster “franchise” movies made for and aimed at a youthful audience, the future of movioging by adults clearly belongs to streaming. Whatever they miss by not seeing classic films in theaters, they will at least be able to see them whenever and as often as they like—and that is what matters most.
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 56

night, trying to come up with a killer tune for the movie Holiday Inn. The song was “White Christmas,” and the songwriter was by that time calling himself Irving Berlin, which I can tell you as a lifelong Episcopalian was a name change that wasn’t foolin’ nobody.

The brilliant and hilarious actress Jackie Hoffman—you may have seen her in Feud: Bette and Joan on FX, or on Hulu’s Only Murders in the Building—often performs a version of “White Christmas” entirely in German, which is as funny and creepy as it sounds. It’s also a powerful reminder that the roots of America’s most goyische anthem were planted in Tolochin in the old Russian Empire, by the son of Moses and Lena Lipkin Beilin. But what makes Hoffman’s performance of the song truly effective is how she throws it away.

Look, there’s no reason to weasel-word it: The history of Hollywood, which is to say the history of 20th-century American culture, is impossible to talk about without talking about Jews. So it was a surprise to learn that the Academy Museum—a newly opened space dedicated to movies and moviemaking by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, built at a cost of $500 million—doesn’t have much to say about the Jews who made it all happen in the first place.

Indeed, when the museum opened in September, the exhibitions seemed carefully orchestrated to avoid the issue altogether. There were galleries devoted to diversity, to special effects, to women. There were exhibits about cameras and composers and art directors. All the collections are glossy and polished, and the whole museum—much of which can be experienced online—is a fascinating and well-assembled telling of the history of the movie business...as long as you don’t notice that there aren’t any Jews in it.

After some critics spoke up about the oversight, its directors announced a six-week film and lecture series highlighting the contributions of Austrian Jews. Vienna in Hollywood: Émigrés and Exiles in the Studio System will celebrate the work of directors Billy Wilder, Fritz Lang, Fred Zinnemann, and Otto Preminger; actors Hedy Lamarr, Peter Lorre, and Paul Henreid; producers Eric Pleskow and Sam Spiegel; screenwriters Vicki Baum, Gina Kaus, and Salka Viertel; as well as composers Erich Wolfgang Korngold and Ernest Gold.

The series sounds fantastic—it opens in Decem-

ber and runs through the end of January 2022—but it still seems carefully designed to elide certain parts of the story of Hollywood.

When the men and women of Vienna in Hollywood: Émigrés and Exiles in the Studio System arrived in Los Angeles, they found an industry in full bloom. The studios were up and running and making payroll every week, restaurants were full of carousing movie stars, the boulevards were lined with shops and apartment towers—the stage, in other words, had been set.

The men—and they were all men—who did the building, men with names like Goldwyn and Zukor and Warner and Laemmle, had arrived years before. And it’s they who are missing from the galleries and exhibitions of the Academy Museum, and here’s why: because, for the most part, they were rat bastards.

Even by the standards of the time, the men who built Hollywood were tyrannical, ruthless businessmen. One of the reasons the movie business moved to Los Angeles, aside from the plentiful sunshine and cheap land, was to put 3,000 miles between it and Thomas Edison’s patent lawyers. Edison, who claimed to be the inventor and patent-holder of the movie camera, insisted that the Jewish show-business entrepreneurs owed him money. Their strategy was, simply: If we’re big enough and rich enough, Edison’s claims won’t matter.

It turned out they were right. Left to grow a huge-
ly profitable and influential business by themselves, the men who built Hollywood did so with unfettered enthusiasm. Along the way, as we all know, they bullied and manipulated and (probably) raped and pillaged.

And they also made some amazing motion pic-
tures that helped Americans understand who they were and what they were becoming. Any truthful telling of the history of the movie business needs to tell their story, too. But we’re having a hard time these days figuring out how to tell a warts-and-all tale. We’re still tying ourselves into knots about Thomas Jeffer-
sion. Imagine if the Academy Museum had installed a statue of Jack Warner, one of the founding fathers of the movie business.

So cultural institutions like the Academy Mu-
seum elect to sweep the ugly parts off-screen. It’s easier to avoid the mishugas. The way things are now, they think it’s safer to keep the Academy Museum center-
door fancy. 

Commentary
A FRIEND OF MINE from a venerable entertainment-industry family once used a great piece of old-timey show-business jargon to describe a movie he didn’t like.

It was too center-door fancy, he said with a shrug. I’m not sure I know exactly what it means, but I can guess. In a theater, the center door is directly upstage from the audience. When a character enters from that door, it’s an unambiguous declaration that the star has arrived. It’s hard to come in through the center door in a natural, spontaneous way.

Something that’s center-door fancy is a little overdone and overproduced. Center-door fancy is something that’s nice-looking, but maybe too nice-looking. The hairstyle of a game-show host, the matching tie-and-pocket square of one of the commentator guys on Sunday football, the dance moves of a South Korean boy band—these are all center-door fancy.

The phrase comes, I’m guessing, from that great wellspring of show business jargon and tradition, the Yiddish theater. If you close your eyes, you can hear one of the impresarios at the Orpheum on Second Avenue in Manhattan, sometime in the early 1910s, dismissing a production with a wave of his hand and saying, in a thick Mel-Brooks-2,000-Year-Old-Man accent, Too much with the center-door fancy!

Here’s a phrase I’ve heard since my very first day in show business: Throw it away. My boss at the time was a hugely successful director, and at my very first rehearsal, I heard him tell one of the actors that he was working too hard to make a certain line funny.

He was pushing it, and that was killing the joke. Throw it away, the director said. And when they did the scene again, the actor said the line with barely an inflection.

And of course it worked.

I suspect that Throw it away came from the same place as center-door fancy—an empty Yiddish theater in lower Manhattan during a rehearsal of, say, Mazel Tov, Molly, a director calling out from the darkened loge, a show that was opening in a week and that still felt too stiff, too formal, too uptown.

That jargon, and that sensibility, traveled uptown eventually. It could be seen in the Broadway productions of the Gershwins, the Marx Brothers, George S. Kaufman, and not too long after, Neil Simon.

But the practical show-business savvy embedded in the Throw it away ethos went further afield. It also made the trip way across town, to the backlots and sound-stages of Southern California where many of those same folks went to work in the sunshine and to forge a new business. Hollywood was a place where the ability to act and stage a scene without a lot of center-door fancy was the recipe for stardom and riches.

It’s always been a rich irony that indelibly “American” movies such as Some Like It Hot and High Noon were directed—and in many cases, written and directed—by Jews who were here in America to create American myths only because they had fled the German and Austrian monsters who then killed the rest of their families. Everyone knows this, but it’s always fun to hear it again: Little Israel Beilin was born in 1888, in what is now Belarus. He eventually ended up, if the legend is correct, in 1940 in a resort hotel in Palm Springs in the middle of the...
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?

This message has been published and paid for by

Facts and Logic About the Middle East
P.O. Box 3460, Berkeley, CA 94703
James Sinkinson, President
Gerardo Joffe (z”l), Founder
FLAME is a tax-exempt, nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization. Its purpose is the research and publication of facts regarding developments in the Middle East and exposing false propaganda that might harm the United States, Israel and other allies in the region. You tax-deductible contributions are welcome.

To receive free FLAME updates, visit our website: www.factsandlogic.org

YOU DESERVE TO KNOW THE TRUTH...
Whitney Ball believed in limited government, personal responsibility, and free enterprise.

That’s why she founded DonorsTrust, a unique, liberty-minded donor-advised fund offering givers like you a reliable, principled partner to carry on their legacy. Though we lost Whitney in 2015, her commitment to protecting donor intent lives on at DonorsTrust.

Who will safeguard your charitable legacy?

Learn how DonorsTrust can protect your legacy of liberty with a Whitney Ball Legacy Fund at donorstrust.org/legacy.