THE NEW MISOGYNY

THE CLAIM THAT ANYONE CAN BE A WOMAN IS A DENIGRATION OF ALL WOMEN

BY CHRISTINE ROSEN
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THANK YOU, EVERYONE.

Abe Greenwald, John Podhoretz, Christine Rosen, Noah Rothman

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# Monthly Commentaries

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To the Editor:

IN HER article on combatting wokeness, Bari Weiss writes about racism as if it’s not real and hasn’t had horrible outsize effects on the lives of black people in the United States (“We Got Here Because of Cowardice. We Get Out With Courage,” November). Could she outline when things were so great in the past?

People who are horrified that a black man could be lynched in broad daylight are grappling with how to address the effects of past racist systems and trying to weed out these effects for the benefit of future generations. They often blunder in the process, but the problem is nonetheless real and shouldn’t be dismissed as a figment of anyone’s imagination.

Annette Wilcox
New York City

To the Editor:

BARI WEISS’S article is brilliant and deserves wide dissemination. As a senior university professor, I was able to hold my own against the woke nonsense promulgated by my department. Indeed, when my colleagues proposed to make our department a “sanctuary department,” I voted no. The tally was 16–1, mine being the only dissenting vote. I voted against the proposal not because I have no sympathy for illegal aliens, but because the arguments being made promoted a false narrative. Professors don’t know the legal status of their students—no one ever asks—so what’s the point? And if the police should come looking for an illegal alien in our classrooms (a highly unlikely event), how would we defend the student? Arm the professors? I am a specialist in 16th- and 17th-century Spanish literature and don’t know how to shoot a gun. Those in favor argued that our students were shaking in their boots because they were afraid of a police raid. If this is true, it’s because my colleagues have instilled fear in their hearts.

On the other hand, as a novelist, I have been less courageous. My publisher has bullied me into taking every word that might possibly offend someone out of my forthcoming book. In most cases, I have complied. I admit that I was afraid to lose my publishing contract. However, as the book’s action takes place in the 1930s, I have refused to take out words such as “Negro,” “homosexual,” and “Gypsy” and replace them with “Black,” “gay,” and “Romani” because these words were not in use with their current meanings until the last half of
the 20th century. The editor has argued that the words I used are offensive and must go but has agreed to send the matter to the “sensitivity committee,” where I will not be able to defend my position.

I have long admired Bari Weiss for her courageous stance against the thought policing at the New York Times. Thank you for publishing her article.

Bárbara Mujica
Georgetown University
Bethesda, Maryland

To the Editor:

I GREATLY APPRECIATED Bari Weiss's article on courage. I've spent the past three months participating in school-board meetings, where I denounce the lies of the current moment, and it's been hard. I've been harassed, lied about, and labeled a white supremacist. I am, in fact, an American of Mexican descent and in no way, shape, or form am I white. Despite the threats and slanders, it's my duty to speak out. I will always do what's right because my children are watching. We have been silent for too long.

Abigail Eckhart
Salem, Oregon

To the Editor:

READING Bari Weiss's opening paragraphs, I was reminded of Allen Ginsberg's Howl. The litany of bizarre behaviors, the contradictions, the sheer wildness of it all. Howl was, in its time, shocking. For those who hadn't seen the forest for the trees, I suspect that Weiss's piece might've had the same effect.

Her article might be the most important cultural document of the past few years. Not because it repudiates much of what is a disturbing,
illogical, and offensive ideology. But because it presents a remedy to our condition, a remedy that many recognize but refuse to embrace: courage (not strength, power, or coercion) to speak the truth and unmask the madness parading as reasoned social reordering.

If teachers in every school in America read this to their students tomorrow, we’d be well on our way to understanding one another better, celebrating one another more, and loving one another for our similarities and our differences, and that should be the wellspring of our strength as a nation.

West Valentine
Mission Hills, Kansas

To the Editor:

THE COWARDICE that Bari Weiss writes about exists everywhere in this country and has been incubated by fear. Americans live in fear of losing their comfort, their health, their way of life, and their liberty. The fear paralyzes us and prevents us from fighting for our principles. The fear can be tamped down some by our going along with the majority, but we then relinquish our right to disagree.

So many younger Americans have been indoctrinated into ideologies full of falsehoods. And because they have lived only in this beautiful republic, they do not know how precious it is. Our precious republic is now under threat of destruction because so many lack courage.

Boanerges Rubalcava
Salt Lake City, Utah

To the Editor:

Bari Weiss’s essay might be one of the most important pieces of journalism published in the past five years. It is the “check engine light” alert of the American project.

As a conservative, I was shaken to my core to see someone from the other political side call out the devastating effects of the messaging of Woke America. I’ve read Weiss’s piece multiple times, and it leaves me speechless after each reading. I literally agreed with every sentence. What a fantastic declaration of truth and challenge to us all.

David Price
Conway, Arkansas

To the Editor:

“Here are many older and retired Americans like me who are not threatened personally by the cancel culture that Bari Weiss describes. We don’t depend on wage income or career advancement, and we no longer care much about what people think of us. But because we don’t often face situations that could lead to cancellation, we have few opportunities to oppose it in ways that matter.

Many of us were fooled in the 1960s, and our generation bears a lot of responsibility for the present insanity. Something we thought was freedom turned out to be the progressive infantilization of our generation and a mode of servitude for our descendants. Has experience taught us anything, and what can we do at this late date?

We have resources—knowledge, insight, perhaps even wisdom—that we can develop and weaponize. As individuals, we won’t be heard above the noise and rancor of the media, but at the person-to-person level we can still be “influencers” and “thought leaders” of a sort. It is important to learn the territory, starting with the irrational assertions of CRT. We can speak fearlessly from our hearts—without vulgarity—and show respect to others and ourselves.

We’ve lost trust in what we need most: leadership and organization. But if those of us who are appalled by woke insanity can build a foundation of trust, then real leadership might emerge.

Gerald Quinn
Belle Haven, Virginia

Bari Weiss writes:

A NETTE WILCOX is right: People should be horrified by what happened to George Floyd on that day in May 2020. I am. And I regret that she has come away from my piece believing that I deny, in any way, this country’s dark history of racism—in our laws, in our culture, and in our politics. To deny it is not just to erase American history but also the accomplishment of those civil-rights heroes whose sacrifice went so far to mend our still-imperfect union.

What I take issue with—and what I hope my essay conveys—are those who deny Martin Luther King Jr’s understanding of America’s promise. As he put it in his most famous speech: “When the architects of our great republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given its colored people a bad check, a check that has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’ But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to

Letters: January 2022
believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and security of justice.”

The Founders themselves planted the seeds of slavery’s destruction. And our second Founding Fathers—abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass—made it so. I am on the side of those who still believe that the solution to America’s maladies is to force America to live up to its own ideals, not to burn, tear down, and destroy.

To Abigail Eckhart: Thank you for your leadership. Parents like you are changing the tide.

And last: eternal gratitude to West Valentine for the Allen Ginsberg comparison that I didn’t know I needed.

Wokeness and the Jews

To the Editor:
SAMUEL J. ABRAMS and Jack Wertheimer present a compelling case for why American Jews should be very wary of the new progressive agenda (“The Woke Threat to America—and to American Jews,” November). Their plea for leadership to speak out against this is correct, but I fear it is too little and too late. The non-Orthodox Jewish movements in America have become aligned with liberal and progressive woke causes at the expense of Jewish particularism.

This was, very sadly, demonstrated at a wedding I recently attended. The ceremony was conducted by a Conservative rabbi. He ended with the breaking of a glass, and he reminded all present of the tragic losses during the pandemic. But, as our secular Israeli cousin noted, he neglected to say, Im esh-kachech Yerushalayim—if I forget thee, Jerusalem.

Marc J. Yunis
Roslyn Heights, New York

Comedy Lives

To the Editor:
THANKS TO David Zucker for his article about the state of comedy in modern-day America (“Destroying Comedy,” November). It was, as the worthies say, pitch-perfect. Airplane, too, was pitch-perfect. Your movie has stood the test of time. I rewatched it recently and…laughed. Yes, I laughed. Surely, that makes me guilty of something. Kill me now for my illegal smile. I wear my sin proudly.

When the Red Guards attack, humor is the first victim. Same for the Office of Diversity and Inclusion. But here I sit, out in the country, with my hoard of guns, toilet paper, meat, and mini-nukes, waiting for another laugh and the condemnation sure to follow. See if I care.

By the way, I recently rewatched Blazing Saddles. The best jokes were censored. Kill me now.

Charles Pluckhahn
Snowden, Washington

To the Editor:
DAVID Zucker’s article makes it clear that it’s time for the comedians to take comedy back. Zucker, Bill Maher, Dave Chappelle, Jerry Seinfeld, and others have cracked open the door. Perhaps what we need is a politically incorrect TV special. Gather as many comedians together as possible who are willing to tell politically incorrect jokes, one after another, leaving no untouchable group or subject untouched.

Nancy O’Brien
Imlay City, Michigan

To the Editor:
I LOVED David Zucker’s article. If humanity loses its sense of humor, then it is no longer humanity. It is often hard, in many aspects of American life, to give voice to the minority while adhering to a majority rule. This goes for comedy, too. Add to that the difficulty of a joke being funny to a given person on a given occasion and offensive to another person at another time. I’m reminded of teens who thought dead-baby jokes were funny until they got older and knew the pain involved in such matters.

We must enter a comedy venue with respect for the craft. There’s a portion of the naysayers who feel it is sport to be offended, or that taking offence will gain them some reward. I say, full speed ahead. Those who are offended can go do or see something else.

Lori Monahan
Orlando, Florida
There have never been more people seeking safety and so few places willing to welcome them.

Support refugees today.

Help Afghan refugees rebuild their lives

HIAS is the international Jewish organization that provides critical support to refugees in the United States and 15 countries around the world.
HERE’S NO NEED for panic,” the experts always tell us—right before they panic. On November 25, South African researchers announced they’d identify yet another variant of the COVID-19 virus circulating in their country. It appeared to be spreading fast. The World Health Organization dubbed the new strain Omicron. And this new variant looks like a doozy, with more than 50 mutations diverging from the “ancestral,” or Wuhan, strain of the virus. These mutations could make Omicron more transmissible than earlier strains and better able to elude the immunity conferred by vaccines or previous infections.

Based on the initial reports, it sounded pretty scary. And so was the reaction to them. New York State officials advised health-care providers to consider canceling elective medical procedures. The stock market plunged 900 points, its biggest drop of the year. Suddenly it seemed as if we were heading into March 2020 all over again.

Within hours, the Biden White House announced it was shutting down travel, not just from South Africa, but from seven other African nations, most of which had yet to report a single case of the new variant. On November 29, Biden called the variant a “cause for concern, not a cause for panic.” (The president’s reassuring words were slightly undercut by the fact that he repeatedly mispronounced the new strain “Omni-cron.”) Official issued stricter COVID-testing rules for travelers entering the country and floated a plan requiring some visitors to self-quarantine.

The administration hoped to convey the message that Biden has a fir grip on the public-health tiller. In truth, the measures the White House rushed to announce were either counterproductive, largely irrelevant, or basic steps that should have been taken months earlier.

Despite delays and miscues, the U.S. has made progress. More than 70 percent of Americans over the age of 12 are fully vaccinated, and rates of hospitalization and deaths are far below their peaks. Although cases in which vaccinated people become infected are rising, those breakthrough infections tend to be mild. As a result, the overall U.S. COVID case count is becoming increasingly decoupled from the rate of serious and fatal infections. In other words, for a growing majority of sufferers, COVID is now a temporary annoyance rather than a terrifying scourge. And yet our health official and the media still tend to focus on case counts, rather than hospitalizations and deaths, as the benchmark metric. That lopsided emphasis makes it harder to discuss sensible policies. And the new frenzy over Omicron threatens to widen that disconnect between our perceived and actual levels of risk.

But this doesn’t mean Omicron isn’t a problem. For conservatives, it’s tempting to assume that each new wave of COVID paranoia—like the Delta variant and, now, Omicron—is just media hype, another excuse for endless restrictions on life and commerce. Still, Omicron, like Delta before it, could be a significant threat to public health. Data from South Africa, where most people have already been infected with the Delta variant, suggest Omicron can readily break through the immunity conferred by previous coronavirus infections. Early indications hint that Omicron could be three to six times more transmissible than Delta.

Virologists were also alarmed to learn that most
of the Omicron mutations involve changes to the spike protein that the virus uses to attach itself to human cells. Since our current vaccines target that spike protein, does this mean Omicron could make our vaccines toothless? The newest studies indicate that the variant significantly reduces—but doesn’t fully eliminate—the effectiveness of a two-dose vaccine regimen. A booster shot will restore the original level of protection.

All this sounds worrisome. It certainly looks like Omicron could replace Delta as the dominant strain of COVID. But it doesn’t address the most important question: Will Omicron kill you?

Here, the early evidence out of South Africa is reassuring. Despite a dramatic spike in infections, only a small number of patients have required hospitalization. In fact, in that country’s leading hospital treating COVID cases, most patients who tested positive for the disease were admitted for “diagnoses unrelated to COVID-19,” according to a new report. Few needed supplemental oxygen, and only one was in intensive care. Looking at all 166 patients with COVID admitted during South Africa’s late-November Omicron surge, the study found that the average hospital stay was shorter—only 2.8 days—and death rates were less than half of what they had been over the previous 18 months.

South Africa has a very young population, so it is too soon to say whether Omicron will show the same benign characteristics in countries like the U.S. with more elderly residents. But, given that about 80 percent of U.S. COVID deaths occur among people 65 and older—and 87 percent of Americans in that age group are fully vaccinated—the outlook for managing Omicron in the U.S. seems promising.

This doesn’t mean we’re entirely out of the woods. COVID is still killing about 1,000 people each day in America. But despite all the talk about breakthrough infections, the vast majority of people dying of COVID today are unvaccinated. There’s no reason to think Omicron will radically change that picture. If Omicron—or some variant that follows it—starts making end runs around vaccines, those vaccines can be quickly tweaked to adjust to the new threats. Meanwhile, booster shots appear to be providing excellent protection against serious breakthrough infections.

In other words, COVID remains a problem, and Omicron adds challenging new wrinkles. But it’s a manageable problem. And that’s what makes many of today’s COVID policies so frustrating. Biden’s Africa travel ban, for example, gave the impression of decisive action. But South Africa complained that it was being penalized for doing the research that uncovered the new strain. “Excellent science should be applauded and not punished,” the country’s foreign ministry said.

In the future, other countries might hesitate before sharing such research with the world. At any rate, it’s quite likely the variant didn’t originate in South Africa and was merely detected there.

The best way to prevent such variants from spreading is to keep them from emerging in the first place. And that requires improving the dismal vaccination rates in poor countries where the variants are mostly likely to develop. The U.S. has already pledged to deliver more than a billion vaccine doses to the developing world, but that’s far short of the 6 to 9 billion doses needed. The U.S. shouldn’t have to carry this burden alone, but ramping up our “vaccine diplomacy” would make ethical and diplomatic sense, not to mention help protect the lives of American citizens.

Here at home, the administration has been slow to give Americans the tools they need to protect themselves. The U.S. has spent roughly $5 trillion on pandemic relief to date. Yet home test kits—potentially one of the most cost-effective, frontline defenses against the disease—remain expensive and hard to find in American drugstores. Our public health official have never had much faith in the public’s ability to make sensible personal decisions. Perhaps that’s why affordable test kits—which empower people with information about their own health—have been such a low priority. It wasn’t until the Omicron scare in late November that Biden announced a plan to provide the public with “free” home test kits, though you’ll have to buy them and get reimbursed somehow. How? The administration promises to nail down the details—sometime in “mid-January” 2022.

When Biden was campaigning for president, he and his handlers probably assumed it would be easy to improve on Trump’s erratic pandemic record. And they knew they would reap the political windfall from Operation Warp Speed, Trump’s signature COVID achievement. But then the Delta variant extended the pandemic longer than expected. And now Omicron just might extend it some more. COVID has a way of outsmarting the experts. It seems to be evolving from a one-time crisis to a permanent, low-level endemic—something we need to mitigate when we can and live with when we can’t.

Biden never prepared the country for this kind of hard-headed realism. Quite the opposite: He ran on the promise of eradicating the disease. “We’re not going to shut down the country,” Biden endlessly repeated on the campaign trail. “We’re going to shut down the virus!” It was a brilliant campaign line. Or would have been if the Biden team actually had a plan to shut down the virus. Instead, it might go down in history as the “Read my lips!” of the Biden presidency. »
HERE IS A NEW scourge befouling the media landscape, one that our self-appointed mandarins have declared themselves eager to combat: misinformation.

The Aspen Institute’s Commission on Information Disorder recently released a report that blamed misinformation for a range of social problems: “Information disorder is a crisis that exacerbates all other crises…. Information disorder makes any health crisis more deadly. It slows down our response time on climate change. It undermines democracy. It creates a culture in which racist, ethnic, and gender attacks are seen as solutions, not problems. Today, mis- and disinformation have become a force multiplier for exacerbating our worst problems as a society. Hundreds of millions of people pay the price, every single day, for a world disordered by lies.”

With $65 million in backing from investors such as George Soros and Reid Hoffman, the newly organized Project for Good Information also vows to fight fake news wherever it roams. As Recode reported, the group’s marketing materials claim, “Traditional media is failing. Disinformation is flourishin . It’s time for a new kind of media.” The project is run by Democratic operative Tara Hoffman, whose company ACRONYM created the app that spectacularly bungled the Iowa Democratic caucus vote in 2020.

And as Ben Smith reported in the New York Times, the Shorenstein Center at Harvard University has been hosting a series of meetings with major media executives to “help newsroom leaders fight misinformation and media manipulation.” Even Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg has apologized for his platform’s role in spreading misinformation.

The origin of this new wave of portentous declarations and hand-wringing can be found in the Trump years. In an insightful piece in Harper’s, Joseph Bernstein labels this effort Big Disinfo. It’s “a new field of knowledge production that emerged during the Trump years at the juncture of media, academia, and policy research,” he writes. “A kind of EPA for content, it seeks to expose the spread of various sorts of ‘toxicity’ on social-media platforms, the downstream effects of this spread, and the platforms’ clumsy, dishonest, and half-hearted attempts to halt it.” As Bernstein argues, “As an environmental cleanup project, it presumes a harm model of content consumption. Just as, say, smoking causes cancer, consuming bad information must cause changes in belief or behavior that are bad, by some standard.”

Big Disinfo has gained in popularity in mainstream media outlets in part because it claims to solve the problem of bad information while placing blame for it on anyone other than mainstream media. In fact, those diagnosing our illness and prescribing the cure are themselves purveyors of the “infodemic” they claim is upon us.

The Aspen Institute’s Commission, for example,
includes several people who have actively engaged in misinformation efforts. As the Washington Free Beacon reported, one of the Commission’s advisers, Yoel Roth, was the Twitter executive who blocked his site’s users from sharing the New York Post story about Hunter Biden’s laptop just before the 2020 election. Adviser Renee DiResta is something of a misinformation wunderkind as well. She was an adviser to American Engagement Technologies, which, the Beacon reports, is a “tech company that created fake online personas to stifle the Republican vote in the 2017 special Senate election in Alabama.”

The commission’s co-chair, Katie Couric, is also familiar with manipulating facts to yield favorable outcomes. She admitted in her recently published memoir that she had removed and edited statements made by Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg about athletes protesting the playing of the National Anthem. Ginsburg’s criticism of the practice might have angered her fellow liberals, Couric feared. Commissioner Rashad Robinson, head of the activist group Color of Change, also helped spread misinformation by promoting the hate-crime hoax of actor Jussie Smollett even after it was clear Smollett (currently on trial for criminal charges related to the staging of the attack) was lying. And then there is commission member Prince Harry, an expat British ex-royal with few qualific tions but a lifetime of evidence of his own questionable judgment (such as dressing up as a Nazi and, more recently, whining to Oprah about the family that funds his lavish lifestyle). Earlier this year, Harry declared the First Amendment “bonkers.”

The Aspen Commission’s report says that there is no such thing as an “arbiter of truth,” and yet our media gatekeepers have claimed that mantle for themselves—with decidedly mixed results—for some time.

Consider the fact that Russiagate, a years-long effort to prove that Donald Trump was being blackmailed and controlled, proved untrue yet was given constant media attention, while the story of Hunter Biden’s laptop and its contents, which proved true, was actively suppressed with the explicit purpose of protecting Joe Biden’s chances of becoming president. We live in a surreal reality moment when the lie was given ample airtime and featured prominently in print, while the truth was smothered and labeled disinformation.

And yet our self-appointed misinformation warriors have proven unwilling to engage in self-refle tion. Harvard’s Shorenstein Center used the New York Post’s story on Hunter Biden’s laptop computer as the basis for one of its case studies during its recent misinformation sessions. The lesson that the Center’s leaders drew, however, was not the one anyone who values the truth should follow. According to the Times, the Shorenstein Center claimed that the Hunter Biden story offered “an instructive case study on the power of social media and news organizations to mitigate media manipulation campaigns.” In other words, the suppression of information deemed by “experts” to be misinformation was precisely the kind of Good Information objective we should be pursuing. The research director of the center, Joan Donovan, told the Times that the Hunter Biden case study was “designed to cause conversation—it’s not supposed to leave you resolved as a reader.”

But what is there to resolve about the fact that the Fourth Estate eagerly embraced the role of Chief Information Censor on behalf of a Democratic candidate for president?

Misinformation and disinformation are nothing new. Propaganda, political dirty tricks, and deliberate lies have been with us a while—and have often been a point of pride for their practitioners. It was not that long ago that Ben Rhodes, then a top aide to President Obama, boasted about creating an “echo chamber” in the media to spread falsehoods about the details of Obama’s Iran nuclear deal.

It is true that misinformation has taken on greater significance thanks to the scale and speed of the social-media platforms that spread it. But the new sanctimony about misinformation should be leavened with some healthy skepticism about the movement’s major actors. As Bernstein noted, in some sense “the misinformation project is simply an unofficial partnership between Big Tech, corporate media, elite universities, and cash-rich foundations.” The crusade against misinformation is an approximate mirror image of Donald Trump’s war against “fake news.”

Control of information is control of one of the most valuable commodities in the developed world: people’s attention. And people want their confirmation biases affirmed. But scholars and commissioners studying misinformation also suffer from confirmation bias. Contra the proposals made by panels and commissions on misinformation, the most radical thing we could do right now isn’t to give more power to elites or the federal government to control information. Their record of late—Russiagate, Hunter Biden, the Covington kids, the Wuhan lab-leak hypothesis, Border Patrol officer with whips, the Kyle Rittenhouse trial—has not been stellar. It would be far better for the health of the “information ecosystem” that these supposed experts are always invoking if reporters focused on shoring up what were once unassailable tenets of journalism—balance, iron-clad sourcing, and critical independence from and skepticism about the powerful. Instead, they are power’s handmaidens.
Disaster of the Senate

MATTHEW CONTINETTI

CHUCK SCHUMER’S first year as Senate majority leader is ending the same way it began: chaotically. The New York Democrat was huddled in an undisclosed location on Capitol Hill on the afternoon of January 6 when he learned that Jon Ossoff had defeated incumbent Republican senator David Perdue of Georgia. That victory gave Senate Democrats their 50th seat, Vice President Kamala Harris the tie-breaking vote, and Schumer the office he’d wanted since he entered the Senate in 1999. But the atmosphere around him was not exactly celebratory. Mitch McConnell, Schumer’s GOP counterpart, offered tepid congratulations. A mob was ransacking the Senate chamber nearby.

Twelve months later, the Capitol is secure. But Schumer’s job isn’t any easier. He’s had to learn the ropes of the majority-leader position without the benefit of an actual majority. He’s had to please center-left Joe Manchin as well as so-far-left-he’s-upside-down Bernie Sanders. Schumer has had to figure out how his background in communications, candidate recruitment, and campaign strategy fit in an office whose most successful occupants have been affectless and publicity-averse tacticians (see: McConnell). He’s had to ward off a potential primary challenge from the neo-socialist left without alienating the suburban moderates who put Joe Biden in the White House. His record so far is mixed—at best. “He’s been good,” GOP senator Rick Scott told the New York Times earlier this year. “If you want to elect a Republican majority.”

The unusual political circumstances of 2021 have helped Schumer notch a few wins. The pandemic-related American Rescue Plan Act passed on a party-line vote, but three bills—the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act, the United States Innovation and Competition Act, and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law—all went to the president’s desk with substantial Republican support. Schumer and Biden both say, despite all evidence to the contrary, that the electorate is crying out for Washington to do even more. Or, as Schumer put it during a floor statement in August: “Bold, transformative action—on traditional infrastructure, on helping families, middle-class families, cope, and on climate—will restore that bright, sunny optimism that has been part of this American psyche for centuries.”

Let’s not get carried away. As of this writing, the future of Biden’s $2 trillion Build Back Better plan remains uncertain. And it’s not as though the Senate is suddenly a wonderful place to work. Republicans, including GOP moderate Susan Collins of Maine, have a low opinion of Schumer. They see him as a ruthless but maladroit partisan who doesn’t understand the Senate calendar and who sets up votes without thinking through his endgame. Their negative attitude has made it easy for McConnell to rebuke Schumer’s demand that the GOP provide votes to lift the debt ceiling and rewrite election law.

Schumer’s real problem isn’t McConnell. It’s the clock. He doesn’t know how to tell time politically. Senate majority leaders these days are like NFL coaches in the fourth quarter of a playoff game. Everything comes

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down to time management. Because margins in the Senate are so narrow, and because majorities in Congress are so unstable, an effective leader can’t waste a single moment. He has to make sure he can accomplish all his goals before the session ends and campaign season begins. And he has to keep his coalition together while working with the House of Representatives.

Whatever talent Schumer may possess as a creator of sound bites does not extend to scheduling. He has let deadlines slide. He gives media stunts priority over legislation. Recently, I asked a GOP senator to name a piece of legislation that exemplified Schumer’s haphazard and self-defeating leadership style. “Every bill ever?” the senator replied.

Schumer devoted a week to the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act even though its passage was a foregone conclusion and only one senator voted against its ﬁna language. He spent three days in the spring on the Drinking Water and Wastewater Infrastructure Act of 2021, which passed 89–2, only to fold that legislation into the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law months later, making the earlier vote superfluous. He has forced Republicans to block debate over the Democrats’ two election bills on four separate occasions despite knowing that the GOP isn’t about to budge. Schumer understands that West Virginia Democrat Joe Manchin has no interest in abandoning the ﬁlibuster and that he therefore would not have the 50th vote to achieve it. He is simply more interested in signaling to the left that he’s on their side—and that no Squad member with the initials AOC ought to challenge him in his own 2022 reelection bid in New York—than he is in using his time productively.

This year’s National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) is a case study in Schumer’s clumsiness. The NDAA authorizes the defense budget. Congress has passed it every year for six decades. It typically sails through. But not in 2021. The Senate Armed Services Committee passed the NDAA in July. The full House passed it in September. Whereupon Schumer did ... nothing.

By early November, Democrat Adam Smith of Washington, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, had lost his patience. “I am very distressed,” he told Roll Call. “It’s all sitting there and for some reason Schumer has decided not to do it and there’s no reason for that.” Then Schumer announced that the NDAA would incorporate the United States Innovation and Competition Act that the House has stonewalled since the Senate passed it in the spring. Republicans balked, leaving Schumer to scramble, and further delaying the defense authorization.

Then Schumer cut a face-saving deal with Speaker Nancy Pelosi to appoint a conference committee to look into the competition bill and drop it from the NDAA. Haggling over amendments to the NDAA—including a piece of left-wing virtue-signaling much-desired by Schumer that would repeal the Iraq war authorization from 2002—delayed its passage until after Thanksgiving. When the Senate returned from Turkey Day on November 29, Schumer assumed that finally he’d be able to bring debate on the NDAA to a close. But McConnell outfoxed him. Republicans forced additional debate on their desired amendments. The saga has continued into December. Schumer botched his plans for the rest of the year.

He has no one to blame but himself. The majority leader’s lack of interest in the subtleties of his own institution has led to a pileup of big-ticket items on the Senate floor. As of this writing, Schumer has to send the NDAA to President Biden, fund the government into the new year, raise the debt ceiling, and, he pledges, call the roll on the Build Back Better “social-policy bill.” There is every reason to think that Schumer will somehow muddle through his to-do list, though the fate of Build Back Better depends not on him but on Manchin, who doesn’t seem to be in a rush.

Robert Caro called Lyndon Baines Johnson a “master of the Senate.” Schumer is less a master than a disaster. His ﬁrst year will end in delay, confusion, and unpopularity. Schumer likes to brag that he has memorized the telephone numbers of his 49-member caucus. He’s doing his best to guarantee that after the midterms he will have fewer digits to learn—and will have put himself out of a job.  

Whatever talent Chuck Schumer may possess as a creator of sound bites does not extend to scheduling. He has let deadlines slide. He gives media stunts priority over legislation. Recently, I asked a GOP senator to name a piece of legislation that exemplified Schumer’s haphazard and self-defeating leadership style. “Every bill ever?” the senator replied.
What Zionism Owes Yavneh

Meir Y. Soloveichik

ON HANUKKAH, as part of the country-wide celebration, the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) opened to the public a Jewish town excavated from the earth. Yavneh was where the Sanhedrin, the supreme religious and judicial body of rabbinic Judaism, took up residence in 70 C.E. Talmudic tradition accords the credit for the Sanhedrin's survival to the sage Yohanan ben Zakkai, who fled Jerusalem before it fell. Today, an entire home has been uncovered in Yavneh, a home that clearly belonged to Jews who kept kosher and followed the Levitical laws of ritual purity. It may have been the domicile of a Sanhedrin member. Nearby, a cemetery may well bear the bodies of some of the most important rabbis in Jewish history.

All of Jewish ritual from the destruction of the Second Temple to the present has been defined by what ben Zakkai and his Sanhedrin ordained in Yavneh. It is, after Jerusalem, the most influential site in the history of Jewish law.

Now Yavneh's significance is being celebrated and highlighted by Israeli archeologists. The excavators informed the media that the town represents "a direct voice from the past, from the period when the Jewish leadership salvaged the remaining fragments from the fall of the Temple, went into exile in Yavneh, and set about re-establishing the Jewish people there."

Simultaneously the IAA is staging an exhibit in northern Israel illustrating how the Sanhedrin preserved Judaism and the memory of Jerusalem. Rightly understood, these excavations and this exhibition are nothing less than the righting of a historic wrong, a recognition of all that modern Zionism owes to Yavneh, the Sanhedrin, and the man who oversaw its survival.

While rabbinic sources differ as to details of Yohanan ben Zakkai's story, all agree as to certain facts. The rabbi fled Jerusalem while the Jewish rebels against the Romans were still fighting. He then met with the Roman authority and requested to be allowed to settle the Sanhedrin in Yavneh. But it is often unappreciated why he did so; why did he not hope for the miraculous salvation of the city, as it had been saved in the age of the Maccabees and so often in the Bible? The Talmud stresses that ben Zakkai was horrified by how the Jews in Jerusalem, riven by factionalism, were attacking one another inside the city even as they fought the Romans without. The last straw for ben Zakkai, according to the Talmud, was when the rebels burned their rivals' food. This rabbinic text parallels another in Josephus's contemporaneous history, The Jewish War. Josephus describes the horrid behavior of Jerusalem's Jews toward one another: "It was as if to oblige the Romans they were destroying all that the city had laid up against a siege and hamstringing their own powers.... It was hunger that defeated them, a thing that could never have happened if they had not brought it about themselves."

Jews lost Jerusalem by attacking one another. Nearly 2,000 years later, the moment would be cited...
by Menachem Begin in 1948 when he stood upon the ship Altalena as the forces of his political rival, David Ben Gurion, fire upon members of Begin’s Irgun, and Begin ordered his men not to fire back. Yohanan Ben Zakkai, seeing a Jerusalem where Jew slaughtered Jew, sensed the city would fall not only because of the brutality of the Roman emperor Vespasian’s assault, but because a Jerusalem that had eschewed Jewish unity had no right to expect salvation. He therefore set about preserving Jewish tradition, preparing for an age when Jews could claim Jerusalem again.

There is, sadly, a long tradition of Yavneh misinterpretation. The story of Yohanan ben Zakkai has been misused for years by those who seek to attack the modern Jewish state. The anti-Israel historian Arnold Toynbee asserted that ben Zakkai “took the momentous decision to break with the tradition of militancy which Judas Maccabaeus had inaugurated” in facing down the Seleucid Empire in 165 C.E. Ben Zakkai, in Toynbee’s estimation, “was proclaiming his conversion from the way of Violence to the way of Gentleness; and through this conversion he became the founder of the new Jewry which survived—albeit only as a fossil.”

Decades later, Peter Beinart, arguing for a binational state, asserted that when Yohanan ben Zakkai “asked the Roman Emperor to give him Yavneh, he was acknowledging that a phase of Jewish history had run its course. It was time for Jews to imagine a different path.” This is preposterous. The very same Talmudic texts that describe ben Zakkai’s fleeing Jerusalem also inform us that he obligated Israel to commemorate Temple rituals in the hope that “meheirah yibaneh beit ha-mikdash,” that the Temple in Jerusalem would soon be rebuilt, believing that Jews must be eternally prepared for the moment when Jerusalem is restored as the capital of Judea, and of Judaism. Indeed, the very rabbinic faith of which Yohanan was patriarch and progenitor celebrated throughout the centuries the victories of Judas Maccabeus. One of the other requests ben Zakkai and others made of Rome was to allow them to preserve the office of Nasi, Jewish patriarch. It was held by descendants of King David and thus served as a tangible link to Jerusalem. The Jewish liturgy, formulated in Yavneh, pleads with God for the restoration of Jerusalem and the Davidic dynasty. Ben Zakkai’s last words on his deathbed were a request to prepare a throne for the spirit of a famous Davidic king coming to escort him to the next world; this, as Yaakov Herzog has put it, was meant “as a tangible symbol of faith that the Kingdom of Israel would surely be restored.”

Yet the hard truth is that it is not only antagonists to Zionism who have misunderstood the legacy of Yavneh; even some of the founders and leaders of modern Israel itself failed to understand him or properly celebrate him. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik once reflected with pain on the fact that Israel’s founders themselves identified Yohanan ben Zakkai with defeat:

When Haim Weizmann opened the Israeli Knesset on Tu B’Shevat 5709, he rejected a list of all the dreamers and fighters who, with their self sacrifice contributed to the miracle of the State of Israel. He began with the Katowitz conference and the Bilu movement in the 1880s; he managed to name Theodore Herzl, Max Nordau, Nahum Sokolow, Ahad Ha’am, Haim Nahman Bialik, Eliezer Ben Yehuda, Menachem Ussishkin, Louis Brandeis and Edmond de Rothschild, but he “forgot” to mention all the generations from R. Yohanan Ben Zakkai to R. Mendel of Vitebsk, who fasted and bemoaned the destruction of the Temple, who ignored all the persecutions, the mockery and laughter, who continued to hope that tomorrow the Temple would be rebuilt, and envisioned the great edifice that would tower over all the mountaintops.

Now we can celebrate the fact that the story is being told properly. The exhibition in the Galilee takes place on the wonderfully named Sanhedrin Trail, which marks the different sites in northern Israel where the judicial body sojourned after Yavneh.* One of the many objects on display is a small lamp that might have been used for both Sabbath and Hanukkah. On the small stone vessel was carved a menorah, a tiny testament to the insistence of rabbinic Jews that they would preserve the memory of Jerusalem until it was restored. Now, finally, Israel is illustrating what the Jewish state owes to Yohanan ben Zakkai and his heirs. Citizens of the state reborn came on Hanukkah in 2021/5782 to walk in the footsteps of the Sanhedrin and understand why the candle of Judaism burns still.
A NEW FORM of misogyny is taking hold in contemporary culture. It comes in the guise of a liberationist philosophy, a transformational movement dedicated to open-mindedness. Its advocates believe they are ushering in a world in which one can be whomever one chooses to be. And in doing so, they are treating womanhood itself—the defining feature of half of humankind—as though it is a disposable commodity.

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Under the dictates of this new dispensation, anyone, regardless of physiology, must be allowed to lay claim to the biological realities of the female body. Anyone should have the right to call themselves a woman.

The misogynistic nature of this revolution has escaped proper scrutiny precisely because it is understood as progressive—as literally better than everything that has come before. And it casts everything that has come before as suspect: All forms of social organization and every idea that denies this movement’s claims have been deemed retrogressive and actively harmful to the forward march of greater rights for all.
This is an audacious form of woman-hatred, especially since it comes in the guise of opening up womanhood, of extending its benefi to all. But by doing so, it becomes nothing less than an assault on what it means to be a woman. And it is not being understood as such by its advocates and their fellow travelers because of a potent combination of two factors: First, people's fears of being labeled bigots, and second, a genuine and commendable effort to extend compassion and care to a very small minority.

That compassion has largely been met with hostility. It is becoming increasingly clear that the new misogyny shares one feature with the old: contempt for women.

The difference is that the contempt is now coming from the radical extremes of the trans movement. As the signs carried by trans activists who recently protested a women's conference in the UK read, “Suck my dick you transphobic cunt.” This is not progress. This is misogyny.

These radicals insist on redefining women in masculine terms. Women are as tough as men; they are not biologically different from men; indeed, many of them were born men, came of age as men, and, despite having lived in the guise of women for but a scant portion of their lives, feel entitled to take positions of power away from women. Even motherhood must be acknowledged as something men should be allowed to claim as their own.

Classic misogyny claimed that men were better than women merely by dint of being born male. The new misogyny insists that being female isn’t an essential biological fact but a mutable identity, something anyone can be. It gives men permission to say to women: We can be women, too.

This flies in the face of all history and experience of Homo sapiens. Biological differences between the sexes are real; indeed, those differences make it possible for us to exist. Literally. But today’s radical egalitarians do not like the consequences and choices that flow from that fact and are currently attempting to erase it from our collective cultural experience.

Acknowledging the distinction between biological sex and how one expresses one’s gender identity is not the issue. That cultural battle has largely been settled in favor of greater acceptance of fluidity in gender expression. No, this is something more radical, and it is poised to turn a nascent fourth wave of feminism into a form of female cultural erasure.

Feminists have long argued that although men and women are fundamentally different, they deserve equal treatment as a matter of human rights. “Ain’t I a Woman?” was the plaintive demand of feminist Sojourner Truth. The trans-rights movement answers that demand with: There is no such thing as a woman.

And so women now f in themselves unwittingly forced into the position of revanchists, trying to reclaim territory they long ago won in their struggle for equality.

In a Vindication of the Rights of Woman, published in 1792, the pioneering British feminist Mary Wollstonecraft memorably insisted that women were rational beings, as capable as men and as deserving of opportunity. “I shall first consider women in the grand light of human creatures, who, in common with men, are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties,” she wrote. “Virtue can only flourish among equals.” The men of her time were not easily convinced; Horace Walpole called Wollstonecraft a “hyena in petticoats.”

Yet by the 19th century, the emergence of what is now called “first-wave feminism” had made gains, particularly around the demands for female suffrage. The feminism of the 1848 Seneca Falls Declaration, led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, embraced the idea that women were different from men but no less equal. Indeed, they often invoked women’s supposedly superior moral sense to argue for an expansion of their rights in the political realm.

In the 20th century, so-called second-wave feminism focused on extensions of these public rights, such as the right of women to make money while working in a job of their choosing, to obtain lines of credit in their own name, and to serve on juries. By the 1960s, feminists were also winning battles for greater reproductive rights, reform of divorce and marital-rape laws,
protections against domestic violence, and equal pay and educational opportunities. Many of those rights were enshrined in federal laws, such as the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972.

This second wave, though more radical in some ways, still often invoked women's unique qualities as women as justification for seeking political power. "The personal is political," a phrase much in use in the 1960s and 1970s, signaled that commitment. In their efforts to combat misogyny and sexism in politics and culture, second-wave feminists created new, women-only spaces (such as domestic violence shelters) and developed theories about women's leadership styles as more cooperative and inclusive than men's. And the battle against sexism waged by the second wave still acknowledged the biological realities of being a woman, even if a few outre figure insisted that those realities also potentially limited women's opportunities; a radical thinker named Shulamith Firestone dreamed of a day when women would be liberated from biology through the widespread use of artificial wombs, for example.

By the 1990s, third-wave feminists extended the feminist critique further, coopting previously sexist tropes and misogynistic language such as "bitch" and engaging in a more "sex-positive" approach to womanhood. They were critical of their second-wave feminist mothers; many rejected the label "feminist" entirely. Culture, not politics, was their chosen battlefield.

Within every wave of feminism, women struggled among themselves with biological essentialism and the attendant questions it raised. Did the ability to become pregnant and give birth hamper women's ability to succeed in society, for example, or did it create an imperative for society to offer special protections for them? Feminist theorists continue to argue about whether defining women in any way related to biology reinforces the very thing that has been used to justify the oppression of women for centuries.

Despite considerable disagreement, however, no one before had denied women the reality of their own biological existence. Rather, the argument that triumphed and made women in the Western world some of the freest people on earth was that whatever differences existed, women were of equal value to men in public life, and their immutable qualities (including motherhood) were as central to human flourishing as the immutable qualities of men.

Today, a fourth wave is emerging, but it does not resemble anything like the feminism of the past, because it contains within it the radical notion that biological sex differences are not real.

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Its early iterations can be found in the 2000s, when women's-studies departments at universities began recasting themselves as gender-studies programs. To study women is to acknowledge the realities and limits of biology. To study gender is, according to its most radical proponents, to study the limitless experience of any number of self-define identities.

The godmother of gender theory, Judith Butler of UC Berkeley, argues in her book Gender Trouble that "male" and "female" are merely arbitrary, constructed categories, a binary based not on any biological realities but rather on oppression. Gender is a performance, a game anyone can and should play, and any efforts to create special protections for women or acknowledge the limits of physical differences between men and women are merely excuses made by the patriarchy to hoard power. Everything is socially constructed, including the physiological experience of bearing children (which Butler describes not as a miracle but as "the compulsory obligation on women's bodies to reproduce").

Instead, Butler argues that by not recognizing biological realities, "the culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its 'natural' past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities."

But how open is that future if it requires everyone to adhere to a dogma that denies biological realities? Butler and her many acolytes have taken literally Simone de Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." In her landmark 1949 book, The Second Sex, Beauvoir observed how social and cultural forces shape one's perception of oneself and the public's idea of what a woman is and should do. Hers was a plea for greater understanding—by men, social institutions, and women themselves—of the fact that the experience of being female created unique challenges and insights not always understood or respected by the other half of the species. However revolutionary its aims, Beauvoir's analysis was grounded in biological realities.

By contrast, anyone who believes that biological realities root women in a particular experience is, according to the new dispensation, a "TERF," or Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist. In a recent interview with the Guardian, Butler went even further, calling anyone who argued for sex-based rights (and sex-exclusive spaces such as women's prisons, rape crisis centers, and the like) a fascist: "The anti-gender ideology is one of the dominant strains of fascism in our time. So the TERFs will not be part of the contemporary struggle against fascism."
THERE ARE MANY people outside the academy who are eager to embrace such radical ideas because by doing so they believe they will help trans people, whom they also believe to be at serious risk. Reporting on a recent protest by trans activists against Netflix (for airing a Dave Chappelle comedy special they think is transphobic), Variety noted that among the protestors was the creator of the series Transparent, Joey (formerly Jill) Soloway. “Trans people are in the middle of a holocaust,” Soloway declared. “Apartheid, murder, a state of emergency, human rights crisis, there’s a mental health crisis. There’s a suicide crisis, a bullying crisis, an anxiety, depression, self-hatred state of emergency crisis.”

If this were true, tolerance for dissenters from the new orthodoxy would rightfully be seen as a serious moral error. Perhaps that is why trans activists insist that compulsory acceptance of the idea that biology is a figment is a necessary stop on the road to true tolerance. Colin Wright has observed at Quillette that “as more and more people refer to themselves as trans, nonbinary, two-spirited, and gender-non-conforming, there’s been a push to realign the objective reality of biological sex to match one’s subjectively experienced gender identity. In the emerging view, the very notion of males and females existing as real biological entities is now seen as obsolete.”

This is a more extreme claim than saying that sex exists on a “spectrum” or that gender is a fluid category that allows for a range of expressions. As Wright notes, according to the reigning trans ideological posture, “a person may literally reimagine their biology, as if by alchemy, by merely stating so.”

Embracing this is not optional. Trans activists insist on the transformation of words and their meanings so as not to offend the extremely small minority of people who identify as women but were not born female. To show proper respect, we are told that women are no longer women, but “people with vaginas.” Women are not mothers, but “birthing people” or “chest-feeders.”

The new misogynists have cleverly coopted the language of feminism and its emphasis on misogyny. Trans activists denounce what they call “transmisogyny” and discuss the implications of the “cotton ceiling.” The latter phrase is a reimagining of “glass ceiling,” the supposedly invisible barrier to women’s career success that second-wave feminism devoted a great deal of energy to shattering. By contrast, the “cotton ceiling” refers to women’s underwear, and, as the BBC described, the phrase is “intended to represent the difficulty some trans women feel they face when seeking relationships or sex.” Planned Parenthood of Toronto hosted a workshop devoted to the cotton ceiling; its director described the session as exploring “the ways in which ideologies of transphobia and transmisogyny impact sexual desire.”

These changes have happened quickly, most noticeably in the transformation of the meaning of words we have used for generations. The results have been jarring. A Huffington Post headline from October read, “California Governor Signs Law to Improve Outcomes for Black Birthing People and Babies.” The Centers for Disease Control under the Biden administration embraced the trend, encouraging “pregnant people” to get COVID vaccinations in late September.

Similarly, in September, the British medical journal the Lancet advertised its latest issue on social media with the quote “Historically, the anatomy and physiology of bodies with vaginas have been neglected.” Lest you think these new semantic rules are equally applied, a few days earlier, the Lancet had no problem promoting an article about prostate health with the following statement: “About 10 million men are currently living with a diagnosis of prostate cancer—making it a major health issue.” It is only women whose bodies have been erased and replaced by “bodies with vaginas.”

The deliberate sowing of confusion about what to call men and women was also on display when the Biden administration announced that Rachel Levine, an assistant secretary at the Department of Health and Human Services, was made a four-star admiral in the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps. The administration boasted that Levine was both the first transgender appointee to reach this rank as well as the “first female four-star admiral.”

But Levine in fact is not biologically female (she transitioned in 2011, when she was in her forties, but lived most of her life as a biological male). She identifies as a woman, and it would have been more appropriate to say she was the first woman to achieve that rank, or more precisely, the first trans woman. But the use of the word “female” by the Biden administration was purposeful. It is meant to elide distinctions based on biological realities, denying half the population its unique characteristics, all while those who use the term are patting themselves on the back for their inclusiveness and tolerance. No wonder the announcement prompted cynicism; as one observer noted on Twitter, Levine’s appointment proved that “anything women can do, biological men can do better.”

This is not an argument for denying Levine her right to identify as she chooses. But dehumanizing biological women by turning them into abstractions such as more and more people refer to themselves as trans, nonbinary, two-spirited, and gender-non-conforming, there’s been a push to realign the objective reality of biological sex to match one’s subjectively experienced gender identity. In the emerging view, the very notion of males and females existing as real biological entities is now seen as obsolete.”

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But Levine in fact is not biologically female (she transitioned in 2011, when she was in her forties, but lived most of her life as a biological male). She identifies as a woman, and it would have been more appropriate to say she was the first woman to achieve that rank, or more precisely, the first trans woman. But the use of the word “female” by the Biden administration was purposeful. It is meant to elide distinctions based on biological realities, denying half the population its unique characteristics, all while those who use the term are patting themselves on the back for their inclusiveness and tolerance. No wonder the announcement prompted cynicism; as one observer noted on Twitter, Levine’s appointment proved that “anything women can do, biological men can do better.”

This is not an argument for denying Levine her right to identify as she chooses. But dehumanizing biological women by turning them into abstractions such
as “bodies with vaginas” and “people with cervixes” is not striking a blow for tolerance and equality. It is the bureaucratization of misogyny.

And it spares no one. This fall, the American Civil Liberties Union chose to honor Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg on the anniversary of her death by removing the word “woman” from something she had said during her confirmation hearings. The doctored statement now read, “The decision whether or not to bear a child is central to a [person]’s life, to [their] well-being and dignity.” Just a year ago, the ACLU had published the same quotation with the word “woman” still intact.

The effort to transform words and their meaning is part of a broader effort to police behavior regarding who can and cannot speak for women and their experiences. Just as an earlier generation of activists made use of “queer theory” to pursue a political agenda that called for “queering” normal spaces and activities (to chip away at “normativity” in hopes of eventually erasing the concept of “normal” entirely), today’s activists seek to use language to confuse what is understood as average or normal while also policing the behavior of others.

This effort extends beyond semantics. It also demands the destruction of female-only spaces. If, as trans activists demand, we accept that someone born male can identify as female, then we must also accept that they should have access to women’s spaces. Contrary to what progressives claim, however, this idea is neither popular nor justifiable by historical precedent. When women understandably object, citing concerns for their own physical safety or privacy, they are not listened to respectfully, nor are their concerns treated seriously. Rather, they are called bigoted.

Transphobia is also wielded as a weapon against anyone who challenges born-male people competing as women in sports competitions. Trans women with significant physical advantages, like the mixed-martial-arts athlete who identifies as female and pumped a born-female competitor while wearing an “End Trans Genocide” T-shirt, are using the biological advantages that come from having been born male (and experiencing male puberty) against women. Women are losing out on college scholarships, membership on Olympic teams, and careers in professional athletics because trans women who compete with a significant physiological advantage are beating them (in the case of mixed-martial-arts competitions, quite literally).

Trans activists tend to downplay the idea that trans-female athletes compete at a significant advantage compared with born-female athletes. Yet trans women have clearly figured this out. University of Pennsylvania student Lia Thomas, who is biologically male and competed as a male in NCAA Division I swimming for three years, now identifies—an competes as—a woman. Not surprisingly, she is obliterating female competitors thanks to the great physiological advantages she has as someone who was born male and went through puberty as a male, with the resulting increase in strength, muscle mass, and bone density. “Thomas blasted the number one 200 free time and the second-fastest 500 free time in the nation,” SwimSwam news reported after a recent meet, where Thomas broke Penn’s existing women’s swim records. As a male, Thomas was one of many good but not exceptional swimmers. But by competing as a woman, Thomas has now become an Olympic-caliber athlete. And her extraordinary boost in status comes at the expense of female athletes whose training and determination can never overcome Thomas’s obvious physical advantages.

The absurdity of calling this situation a blow for equality was captured well in a recent episode of South Park called “Board Girls.” The episode features a character, Heather Swanson, who transitioned from male to female two weeks earlier and goes on to win every female sports competition in the town. Sporting a full beard and a masculine physique, she trounces the wife of “PC Principal” in the town’s “strong woman” competition. Her comeuppance comes in the form of the “board girls,” an all-female board-games club that destroys her in competitions that do not require physical strength. South Park was parodying something that our nation’s cultural elite have embraced uncritically: the notion that the way to stop the stereotyping of women

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as the weaker sex is to have women’s desires, interests, and accomplishments represented by people who were born male.

This extends to the workplace, where people born male are now granted the moral authority to speak on behalf of all women. Consider a recent profile of Natalie Egan in Elle. Egan, a self-described failed former “tech bro,” transitioned to female and soon rebranded herself as the voice and face of gender equality in the workplace. “It wasn’t just because she was trans,” Elle notes. “It was because, having left the identity of a successful white man behind, she was experiencing marginalization and vulnerability.” Egan’s executive coach says Egan “really had the experience as a woman of not being taken seriously, and not being acknowledged as an equal.”

Egan now enjoys lucrative invites as a keynote speaker at women’s networking events and is selling an app, Translator, that “works with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and Human Resources departments at companies like Claire’s and ViacomCBS.” Good for her, but Egan’s handful of years living as a woman does not automatically grant her the authority to speak on behalf of women in the workplace.

Most disturbingly, the new misogyny demands that women conform to trans ideology in even the most intimate situations: the people to whom they feel sexually attracted. Trans activists insist that desire itself is socially constructed, and so can be deconstructed to conform to trans demands for acceptance.

A much-lauded new book, The Right to Sex, by the Oxford philosopher Amia Srinivasan, begins with an unusual disclaimer: “At birth, bodies are sorted as ‘male’ or ‘female,’ though many bodies must be mutilated to fit one category or the other, and many bodies will later protest against the decision that was made.” She goes on to ask, “Is anyone innately attracted to penises or vagina? Or are we first attracted to ways of being in the world, including bodily ways, which we later learn to associate with certain specific parts of the body?”

In other words, sexual desire and sexual preference are merely learned behaviors, roles we can take on and discard as we please. “Some bodies are for other bodies to have sex with,” Srinivasan states. But not every body. To the gay man who expresses “disgust at vaginas,” she asks, “Is this the expression of an innate, and thus permissible revulsion—or a learned and suspect misogyny?”

In practice, this approach to desire has led to the policing of sexuality on a grand scale, particularly of lesbians, who insist that they are attracted only to women with female sex organs. The BBC recently interviewed lesbians who had been threatened and labeled transphobic because they acknowledged that they were sexually attracted only to biological women. As the reporter notes: “They described being harassed and silenced if they tried to discuss the issue openly. I received online abuse myself when I tried to find interviewees using social media.”

The sex-shaming is driven by a small number of activists who have outsized influence thanks to social media and cancel culture. “I’ve had someone saying they would rather kill me than Hitler,” a 24-year-old lesbian woman told the BBC. “They said they would strangle me with a belt if they were in a room with me and Hitler.” Her crime: “She says she is only sexually attracted to women who are biologically female and have vaginas. She therefore only has sex and relationships with women who are biologically female.” As a result, she has been called transphobic, a TERF, and a “genital fetishist” by trans activists.

Another lesbian activist told the reporter, “Lesbians are still extremely scared to speak because they think they won’t be believed, because the trans ideology is so silencing everywhere.” “This word ‘transphobia’ has been placed like a dragon in the path to stop discussion about really important issues,” another said.

In a recent interview with the libertarian UK magazine Spiked, lesbian activist Kate Harris was blunt about what is happening: “At its very heart is misogyny. It’s so regressive, so misogynistic and so homophobic. It reinforces all the old stereotypes that we thought had gone.” Harris notes emphatically that this is not an argument for intolerance against trans people. “We want every single child to grow up being what he or she wants to be, not tied down by pink or blue gender roles,” she says. “I have fought for 50 years for people’s right to
do what they want. Wear a dress! Call yourself Ariadne! But don’t say you are a woman. And don’t say that I am transphobic if I don’t want to have sex with you because you’re a man with a penis wearing a dress.”

At its root, misogyny is a hatred of the things that give women their unique power and their unique vulnerability—the biological differences that make women as a group physically weaker in hand-to-hand combat, for example, but powerful enough to perform the labor of pregnancy and childbirth. And to outlive men. One of feminism’s salient achievements was arguing that those unique qualities did not make women morally, intellectually, legally, or politically inferior.

The new misogyny in effect says that it does. It claims that since everyone who wants to be a woman does not have to be born that way, it’s offensive and bigoted to believe the biological facts that flow from the truth that one is—as the title of feminist Adrienne Rich’s 1976 book put it—Of Woman Born. It forces on society a lie about women and enforces it through illiberal intimidation. It is neither tolerant nor liberating.

Spiked reported on a recent feminist human-rights conference in the UK, where women, many of them survivors of male violence, had convened to discuss issues such as rape, domestic abuse, and sex trafficking. Trans activists picketed and tried to shout down speakers, including women who had organized to protect other women from rape in a Kenyan refugee camp. Trans activists claimed the conference “puts the lives of our trans and non-binary friends in danger” because it focused on the needs of those born female.

One of the most prominent critics of trans activist extremism, Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling, has been attacked relentlessly on social media by activists after she tweeted support for a woman who had lost her job for saying biological sex was real, and for supporting lesbian activist Magdalen Berns, who had argued publicly that lesbians should not be called bigots merely because they aren’t sexually attracted to trans women. As Rowling wrote in a statement on her personal website, she has dealt with “threats of violence, to be told I was literally killing trans people with my hate, to be called cunt and bitch and, of course, for my books to be burned.”

In late November, however, Rowling posted on Twitter that police had to get involved after trans activists posted pictures of themselves in front of her house with her address clearly visible in a blatant attempt to dox her. She noted how many women she’s spoken to, including many with no public profile who “have been subject to campaigns of intimidation which range from being hounded on social media, the targeting of their employers, all the way up to doxing and direct threats of violence, including rape.” She added, “None of these women are protected in the way I am. They and their families have been put into a state of fear and distress for no other reason than that they refuse to uncritically accept that the socio-political concept of gender identity should replace that of sex.…I’ve now received so many death threats I could paper the house with them, and I haven’t stopped speaking out. Perhaps—and I’m just throwing this out there—the best way to prove your movement isn’t a threat to women, is to stop stalking, harassing and threatening us.”

Genuine tolerance for trans people doesn’t require the erasure of the characteristics that half of the population believes to be intrinsic to their sense of personhood. Erasing women to inaugurate a “new normal” regarding gender is destructive, not tolerant. And it offers no recognition that what might be acceptable for adults (trans-friendly bathrooms) could be uncomfortable for vulnerable women (domestic violence shelters) or for children.

An extremely small minority is not merely demanding tolerance to live as they choose; they are demanding that the overwhelming majority conform to the language and practices they insist upon, or else be labeled evil doers. They demand that everyone declare and perform their own gender preferences and pronouns with no regard for privacy or restraint.

It’s a strange bargain: not, in the tradition of previous eras of feminism, to extend the rights and protections of womanhood to people born male who now want to live as women, but rather to denigrate the very category of woman, both in language and in function, by claiming it for themselves. The disrespect is staggering. And so is the danger.
Stephen Sondheim's America

The achievements and discontents of our most ambivalent genius

By John Podhoretz

I WAS NOT ALIVE in the 1950s, but had I been, it is likely I would have thought poorly of the time I was living through—for such was the conventional view among American thought workers, from the academy to the nation's cultural institutions to its highfalutin media. They told themselves and the country that the decade was an “age of conformity,” during which Americans did as they were told by cultural forces they did not understand. They moved into houses in the suburbs because the culture somehow mandated it, were horribly “other-directed” rather than properly “inner-directed,” and lived in a cultural desert dominated by the “vast wasteland” that was the newest and most powerful mass medium, television.

In the world of business, Americans were all “organization men,” cogs in a gigantic capitalist machine in which even the putatively powerful were all but interchangeable. Hugely popular novels like The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit offered portraits of bland alienation, as men who survived World War II found themselves living a death-in-life within stiflin bourgeois boundar-
Today’s liberals and conservatives alike look back on the particular set of circumstances in the 1950s as a wondrous baseline from which we have declined dramatically.

ies. (This theme would be repurposed to even greater success by Betty Friedan a decade later in The Feminine Mystique.)

It was the socialist sneerer Irving Howe who came up with the phrase “age of conformity” in a 1954 essay in Dissent, claiming that a soul-killing desire to go along to get along was not only predominant in bourgeois America but had infected even the intellectual class. That class had eschewed the bourgeois-loathing world of bohemia wherein all free thought in America had once resided and was now descending into stasis in the form of tiresome but steady academic jobs or profiteering in journalism. “Capitalism in its most recent stage has found an honored place for the intellectuals; and the intellectuals, far from thinking of themselves as a desperate ‘opposition,’ have been enjoying a return to the bosom of the nation,” Howe wrote. “Those feelings of loneliness one finds among so many American intellectuals, feelings of damp dispirited isolation which undercut the ideology of liberal optimism, are partly due to the breakup of bohemia. Where young writers would once face the world together, they now sink into suburbs, country homes, and college towns.”

Looking back, this all seems deranged (and should encourage us all to bring a sense of modesty when analyzing and judging the moment we are living through). What we know about the 1950s with the benefit of hindsight is that it was a time of literally unprecedented prosperity. America possessed something like 60 percent of the manufacturing capacity on the planet Earth, as it was the only one of the great economic powers on earth whose industrial plant was not compromised or destroyed outright by the effects of World War II. Today’s liberals and conservatives alike look back on its particular set of circumstances as a wondrous baseline from which we have declined dramatically. Yuval Levin notes the high degree of social “solidarity” that characterized the decade, as opposed to the almost cartoonish polarization that bedevils us today. Leftists and liberals take rueful note of the unparalleled strength of labor unions, whose negotiating tactics with surprisingly nonconfrontational industrialists helped raise the nation’s physical laborers into the middle class for the first time in any nation’s history.

Americans gave birth in record numbers, a classic sign of a rising and self-confident nation. Abstract American painting became the most important force in the visual arts; the New York City Ballet under the direction of George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins became the most notable dance company on earth; American poets like Robert Lowell, Frank O’Hara, and John Ashbery succeeded British poets in terms of influence; young American writers of fiction from Bellow to Updike to Malamud to Roth to O’Connor exploded outward with energetic and profane visions of a country teeming with life.

And, in 1957, a 27-year-old man of the theater made his debut on Broadway as the lyricist of a musical based on Romeo and Juliet. Doubtless the young Stephen Sondheim shared the general disdain for the moment through which he was living; they all did. After all, West Side Story is a portrait of a mid-century New York riven with ethnic conflict and juvenile delin-

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Stephen Sondheim’s passing very nearly brings down the final curtain on the era of the self-confident, energetic, overpowingly American 1950s.

America gave Sondheim room, and he took it. And his death on November 28 at the age of 91 stopped the clock. His passing very nearly brings down the final curtain on the era of the self-confident, energetic, overpowingly American 1950s.* He embodied that era, too, in a way, even though his greatest work would be produced decades after—and even though the high-brows of the day (like Irving Howe) certainly did not view his chosen form as any kind of cultural pinnacle.

Sondheim entered Broadway as a preternatural force, with three classic shows—Gypsy and A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum would follow West Side Story over the next five years—under his belt by his 32nd birthday. But that astounding level of achievement did not give him the cultural standing afforded the painters and novelists of his day. The commercial theater was thought, by those who dominated the pages of this magazine and other critical apexes of American culture, to be the province of mostly intolerable middlebrows. Sure, a good show could be entertaining, but any good show was pretty much only that—a work of mere entertainment, not a meaningful exploration of the enduring themes of genuine high art. Sondheim’s medium was deemed essentially banal and of little enduring worth.

Sondheim’s West Side Story collaborator Leonard Bernstein (who composed the score) may have made his fortune and his name writing Broadway hit shows, but he was considered a lion of culture only because he also stood before the New York Philharmonic with a baton in his hand “interpreting” Mahler whilst tossing his hair like a model in a shampoo ad. And Je-

* Only two other famous talents from that era, Woody Allen and Mel Brooks, survive; Brooks has just published a memoir called All About Me at the age of 95. Allen’s own memoir, Apropos of Nothing, came out last year, and its opening chapters about the sociopathic father in whose sociopathic footsteps he would later unconsciously walk are astonishing.
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Rome Robbins, who directed and choreographed *West Side Story*, was deemed an artist of true importance only because he “made” ballets—ballet being thought, for reasons that elude me, to be high art rather than the ludicrous kitsch some of us believe the form to be.

Sondheim was no Bernstein or Robbins. But he had been a pupil in his early twenties of the fiercely avant-garde composer Milton Babbitt. Later in his life, he explained that he had done so “to study composition, theory, and harmony without the attendant musicology that comes in graduate school.” What he learned from Babbitt, he said, “was basic grammar—sophisticated grammar, but grammar.” Babbitt told Sondheim’s biographer Meryle Secrest that his student hadn’t been “interested in becoming what one would call a serious composer, but he wanted to know a great deal more about serious music because he thought it would be suggestive and useful.”

The teenage Sondheim had had the inestimable good luck of knowing Oscar Hammerstein, the most commercially successful Broadway lyricist and veteran librettist. Hammerstein went line by line through the 15-year-old Sondheim’s first juvenile attempt to write a show. It is hard to think of two more divergent men of the theater. Hammerstein’s key quality was an earnest and deep-hearted plainness, while Sondheim combined an astounding wit with an allergy to the honest expression of simple emotion.

But Sondheim recognized that Hammerstein was a genius of a kind—a master not only of the form of popular songwriting but also of theatrical structure. Sondheim described his mentor as “a highly professional, highly rule-conscious man. He didn’t say obey the rules, he just pointed them out. He said, ‘Writing does not consist of saying, ‘Oh, I like that word.’ Writing consists of choosing.’” What Sondheim understood was how extraordinarily sophisticated Hammerstein was in his simplicity, just as he understood that the fierce difficulty Babbitt was excessively dogmatic in his complexity.

The conflict between Babbitt and Hammerstein in the soul of Stephen Sondheim is the key to understanding the astonishing and enduring power of his work. The composer, Babbitt, was a postulant at the altar of deliberately obscurantist modernism. The lyricist, Hammerstein, believed and profited from his painstaking efforts to speak meaningfully (and profitably) to the greatest number of people in words and phrases they could understand.

Bernstein implicitly noted the influence of Babbitt on Sondheim when he observed that the score to *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* was filled with “wrong notes.” What he meant by this was that Sondheim almost perversely refused to resolve musical phrases in a conventional manner most pleasing to the ear. That is true even though *Forum* is easily the silliest show Sondheim ever worked on, an out-and-out farce without a serious moment in it (and by far the most commercially successful of the 13 shows for which he wrote both the music and lyrics).

What is most immediately captivating about Sondheim is the cleverness: he was likely the cleverest songwriter who has ever lived. His wordsmithery—triple rhymes, rhymes within rhymes—had an almost supernatural quality to it, especially because it seemed to spring from his head like Athena and not from a lifetime of literary aspiration. Indeed, he always flippantly said that he was uninterested in such things. “I’m not a reader,” he said after producing two collections of his lyrics featuring insightful commentary about songwriting in general. “Prose is not a natural language for me.” He all but bragged about using a thesaurus to help him with his lyrics. (Someone raise Irving Howe from the dead and then quickly give him some smelling salts.)

But Sondheim’s wit wasn’t just revealed by his word choices. It sprang from his extraordinarily perceptive analysis of human behavior. One of his specialties was angry songs for angry characters whose bitterness...
Ambivalence was, perhaps, the greatest subject for ambitious American artists of Stephen Sondheim’s time. Indeed, they lived that ambivalence every day.

makes them brilliant. A self-loathing middle-aged New Yorker sings of herself and her friends as “the ladies who lunch,” who are “off to the gym, then to a fitting, claiming they’re fat—and looking grim ’cause they’ve been sitting, choosing a hat. Does anyone...still wear...a hat?” Another woman in the same vein threatens her husband with divorce: “Could I leave you, and your shelves of the World’s Best Books, and the evenings of martyred looks, cryptic sighs, sullen glares from those injured eyes?”

Strikingly, his wit was just as evident in his music. He wrote pastiche songs as memorable as the ones he was parodying, as when he invoked Gilbert and Sullivan (“Please Hello”) to describe the Western encroachment on Japan in the mid 19th century in Pacific Overtures, or when he mimicked the Andrews Sisters as three young women lamenting a common boyfriend’s inconstancy in Company’s “You Could Drive a Person Crazy.”

But as deeply as Sondheim represented the pinnacle of American cleverness, his work is actually about his mistrust of it—about people like him (one can assume) who are either unwilling or unable to embrace simple and basic truths. The title song of his 1964 flop Anyone Can Whistle, is the perfect example. “What’s hard is simple,” sings the show’s female lead. “What’s natural comes hard. Maybe you could show me how to let go, lower my guard, learn to be free.”

His breakthrough show, 1970’s Company, is about a 35-year-old man who spends his life as the third wheel to a series of couples, “these good and crazy people, my married friends.” Unable to commit to any woman, he finally makes a tortured birthday wish—a wish that someone would come along to “crowd me with love,” he sings. “Somebody force me to care. Somebody let come through—I’ll always be there, as frightened as you, to help us survive being alive.”

This ambivalence was, perhaps, the greatest subject for ambitious American artists of Sondheim’s time. Indeed, they lived that ambivalence every day. They wanted to have it all (to use a phrase that was not yet in existence) in exactly the manner that made Howe cluck his tongue so disapprovingly. They wanted to be artists, to be academics, to be intellectuals, the very sort of people with the standing to rise above the manners and morals of the petit-bourgeois country they lived in, as such elitists always have. But they also wanted to talk to that country, to guide it, and to enjoy its bounties. They wanted to write important books—but they wanted those books to sell. They wanted to paint according to profoundly abstract theory—but they also wanted to sell those paintings to rich people and to hang in the Met.

The novels of Saul Bellow are shot through with the same sort of ambivalence. Seize the Day, published in 1956, concludes with its hangdog protagonist Tommy Wilhelm weeping at the funeral of someone he doesn’t know because he longs for exactly the same human connection as the protagonist of Company. Moses Herzog, the compulsive letter-writer at the center of Herzog, uses his formidable intellectual gifts to keep himself at a soul-threatening remove from ordinary life. One could say the same of Philip Roth’s profane Portnoy, whose complaint Roth defines at book’s end as “a disorder in which strongly felt ethical and altruistic impulses are perpetually warring with extreme sexual longings.”

These odd thematic similarities to the work of Bellow and Roth raises the question: What role, if any, did Sondheim’s Jewishness play in his work? He was raised by a first-generation Lithuanian Jewish mother who had herself been raised in a traditional household but later preposterously claimed to have been educated at a convent. Janet Sondheim (known as Foxy) designed dresses her husband manufactured—which meant that they were basically in the shmatta business. They divorced when Herbert Sondheim fell in
love with a Catholic—and after marrying his second wife, Herbert never told his two subsequent sons he was a Jew. Sondheim’s biographer Meryle Secrest reports Stephen did not have a bar mitzvah and first entered a synagogue at age 19.

And yet, and yet. From an early age, Sondheim was hungry for entry not in a world of Gentile gentility, but one entirely dominated by Jewish men. And he would spend half a century almost entirely in Jewish company. His collaborators on West Side Story were Bernstein, Robbins, the librettist Arthur Laurents, and the producer Harold Prince. He teamed on Gypsy with Robbins, Laurents, and the composer Jule Styne. Forum’s book was written by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart; the books for Pacific Overtures and Assassins were by John Weidman. Company began his seven-show run with Prince as a director. Later, he would create three shows with James Lapine. All in all, in a career spanning 51 years and 19 shows, Sondheim worked with two Gentile librettists* and one Gentile director**—and that was it.

But to judge by the subject matter he chose, Judaism and the Jewish experience were of limited interest to him. This was a man who wrote shows about a psychopathic Victorian barber, turn-of-the-century Swedes, Japan’s confrontation with the West, the painter Georges Seurat, the discontents of fairy tales, the assassins of American presidents—and never engaged with anything remotely close to a Jewish theme. The same cannot be said of his most distinguished collaborators. Robbins’s greatest triumph came with Fiddler on the Roof, which was produced by Harold Prince. Arthur Laurents’s first Broadway success was a play about anti-Semitism in the military called Home of the Brave. Bernstein was obsessed with Jewish subject matter; among other works, he wrote a symphony inspired by the Kaddish, the most important prayer in the liturgy, and set three Psalms to music in Hebrew.

And yet, like Sondheim, they were mostly de-racinated. The problem for them was that true de-racination was not yet really possible. Until the 1950s, socially ambitious American Jews were denied places in country clubs, white-shoe law firms, upper corporate management, and were subject to strict academic quotas. America was the most welcoming place Jews had ever lived, but Jews were still a people apart even if they never set foot inside a shul or they pretended to have gone to Catholic school. Jews like Hammerstein, whose father was a theater and opera impresario in the late 19th century, actually found a home in show business as they did in no other field in part because show business was an entirely new field of endeavor and therefore had no established barriers to entry.

That strange combination of being entirely American and yet being apart helped provide Sondheim with the distance from convention that all great social critics possess. It has been said of Henry James that his ability to see so deeply into the nature of romantic and sexual conflict was due to some degree to his homosexuality. That Sondheim, who shared James’s often implacable eye, was himself gay also played a role in his apartness.

Though he was not happy with his homosexuality until relatively late in life, Sondheim knew himself too well to enter a marriage with a woman, as many similar men of his time did. He had many opportunities to do so—the actress Lee Remick wanted him even knowing his

* George Furth wrote the books for Company and Merrily We Roll Along. Hugh Wheeler wrote the books for A Little Night Music and Sweeney Todd—if Sweeney Todd, which is an almost entirely sung-through opera, can even be said to have a book, and indeed, Sondheim discarded much of the work Wheeler actually did.
** The director was John Doyle, and the show was Bounce, his last to be produced, in 2008; interestingly enough, Sondheim had been gestating a version of the show, about the Florida land rush, since the early 1950s, and after three stagings under different titles from 1999 until 2008, never cracked it. What’s more, the director of the 1999 version, under the name Wise Guys, was the Briton Sam Mendes, another Jew.
In the course of its three hours, *Sweeney Todd* pays tribute to every emotion known to man in the most vivid score Sondheim or any man of the theater has ever written.

leanings, and so did Mary Rodgers (Richard's daughter), among others. But he was a ruthlessly honest person and would not live falsely in that way. His soaring romantic songs are, as befit his chronic ambivalence, often savage commentaries on the very idea of love as a means of personal salvation. In *Assassins*, two young people duet on the prettiest tune he ever wrote. It's called "I Am Unworthy of Your Love." The two are would-have-been Reagan assassin John Hinckley, who is singing it to Jodie Foster, and would-have-been Gerald Ford assassin Squeaky Fromme, who is singing it to Charles Manson.

*Assassins*, which was first produced in 1991, is a full-frontal assault on the United States, as was *Pacific Overtures* 20 years earlier—both of which he wrote with librettist John Weidman. The former is about the supposed American love of violence, the latter about the evils of American imperialism. There's no getting around this. His pitiless eye saw this country at its worst and then wrongly accepted the noxious idea that its worst was its nature.

There is something oddly Oedipal about it as well. Sondheim had a monstrous mother of a kind that even Philip Roth could hardly have imagined; he said she tried repeatedly to seduce him after his father's abandonment, and in the early 1970s, just before she was to have open-heart surgery, she wrote him a letter that said, "The only regret I have in life is giving you birth." It may be hard to experience the love of country when you were raised by a mother who, on occasion, openly wished you dead.

That same pitiless eye helps explain why most of the shows for which he wrote both music and lyrics are fundamentally unsatisfying. He could not bring himself to provide musical-theater audiences with emotionally reviving conclusions because he did not believe in them. Only two of them rise above this critical flaw. The first is *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, because it's just a delight from beginning to end and wants nothing more than to amuse. The second is his darkest, *Sweeney Todd, the Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, which I believe to be the single greatest work of the American theater.

This sung-through semi-opera has no ambivalence in it whatsoever. It is a wild and incarnadine melodrama set in Victorian London about a homicidal maniac driven to psychosis who ends up murdering the very wife for whose honor he is seeking revenge. But in the course of its three hours, *Sweeney Todd* pays tribute to every emotion known to man in the most beautiful and vivid score he or any man of the theater has ever written. Sondheim, so clearly uncomfortable with the boundaries of ordinary life, was liberated by writing a show set in a world in which there is no ordinary life and there are no boundaries.

"Life was fun, but oh, so intense," sing four middle-aged people as they look back starry-eyed on their youth in his 1971 show *Follies*. "Everything was possible and nothing made sense." Indeed, the life story of Stephen Sondheim is a testament to how everything was and is possible in America. That was true in the 1950s, even if—or maybe because—you were uncomfortably Jewish and uneasily gay. And it remains true today, even if—or maybe because—we can't see it through the present-day haze.

Everything is possible. It's not inevitable. It's not your due. It's just the chance America gives you.
Bitterly Clinging to Russiagate

Why the discrediting of the Steele Dossier matters

By Eli Lake

IN NOVEMBER, U.S. attorney John Durham indicted the primary source for the so-called Steele dossier—a document that supposedly offered proof of a conspiracy between Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign and the Kremlin. Igor Danchenko, a Russian national living in the United States, has been charged with five counts of perjuring himself to the FBI. The indictment alleges that a major source of information for the Steele dossier was an unregistered American lobbyist for Russia named Charles Dolan, who has been a close associate of Bill and Hillary Clinton for years.

This revelation has compelled some observers to look back critically on the behavior of the media these past five years. Erik Wemple, the media columnist of the Washington Post, said that “key claims in the indictment...[raise] specific concerns about reports in the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post and ABC News—as well as more general concerns about how outlets such as MSNBC, CNN, McClatchy and Mother Jones handled the story.”

Even so, the Paul Revers of the Trump-Russia scandal are digging in. Even if former British spy Christopher Steele’s dossier was fake, they tell us, Russiagate was real.

“The Steele dossier undertook to answer the question ‘What the hell is going on with Trump and Russia?’” David Frum writes in the Atlantic. “But the disintegration of the dossier’s answers has not silenced the power of its question.” Indeed, he claims, Durham was actually appointed in 2019 by Trump-administration attorney general William Barr with the specific intention of silencing that question.

Max Boot, Jonathan Chait, David Corn, and Eli Lake is a columnist for Bloomberg and a frequent contributor to Commentary.

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Charlie Savage have offered similar arguments, contending that the recent focus on the fraudulence of the Steele dossier only plays into Trump's effort to discredit the broader investigations into his campaign's ties to Russia. There's a kernel of truth to this argument. As I wrote in the January 2021 issue of Commentary, when it comes to Russia, Trump was both framed and guilty. Former special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation did uncover impressive details about Russia's operation to hack and publicize the emails of the Democratic Party and the Clinton campaign. Furthermore, a 2020 report from the Senate Intelligence Committee confirm that one-time Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort's relationship to a man named Konstantin Kilimnik, who the report says is a Russian intelligence office, presented a major counterintelligence threat.

We also know that Manafort's deputy on the campaign forwarded internal Trump polling data to Kilimnik. Meanwhile, Trump fixe Michael Cohen was pursuing a Moscow Trump Tower deal into the summer of 2016, something Trump lied about during the campaign. Trump consigliere Roger Stone tried (and failed) to get advanced copies of the hacked emails from WikiLeaks. Donald Trump Jr. was eager to meet a Russian lawyer who promised (and failed) to deliver dirt on Hillary Clinton. And Trump publicly denied Russia's role in the email hacks, even after the intelligence community warned that the Russians had done the hacking.

According to Frum and his fellow Russiagaters, these factoids provide a retrospective defense of the investigations into Trump world's ties to Russia. At the very least, Vladimir Putin could have used Trump's lie about having no business in Russia as leverage over him. And given what was known in 2017, there was enough smoke to justify the FBI's search for a fire.

But there are more than a few problems with this argument. To start, Trump's actual foreign policy (as opposed to many of his public statements) foiled Russia's strategic ambitions. From arming Ukraine to recognizing Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's legitimate president, Trump often took a harder line on Moscow than his predecessor had.

Moreover, the record presented about Trump's near-collusion is selective. So while it's true that Manafort directed his deputy to share polling data with Kilimnik, the Senate Intelligence Committee also says Kilimnik was at the same time a regular source for the U.S. Embassy in Kiev. The State Department granted Kilimnik a visa to travel to the United States at the end of 2016. And before linking up with Manafort's political-consulting shop, Kilimnik worked for 10 years in Moscow for the International Republican Institute. In other words, if Kilimnik was a Russian agent, then it looks as if the FBI didn't know it during the 2016 election.

Further context also weakens other claims from Russiagate's defenders. Mueller's indictment of Roger Stone says that Stone told the Trump campaign that he could get hold of the hacked emails. But if Stone had been colluding with Russia, why would he need to pressure intermediaries to get in touch with WikiLeaks instead of going directly to the source? Donald Trump Jr. was indeed eager to receive dirt from a Russian lawyer, Natalia Veselnitskaya. But she already had a longstanding contract with Fusion GPS (the research fir t by the FBI and later by the Mueller team) to lobby against the imposition of human-rights sanctions on Russia. Veselnitskaya provided research prepared by Fusion GPS in her meeting with the younger Trump.

All of these facts were thoroughly investigated, fir t by the FBI and later by the Mueller team. They were not found to be evidence of the conspiracy alleged by Trump critics at the beginning of Trump's presidency. Chait argues that Stone's and Manafort's decisions not to cooperate with Mueller or the Senate committee meant that investigators were “left with suggestive but not conclusive evidence of the full extent of the Trump campaign's collusion with Russia.” But Mueller did obtain full cooperation from Manafort's deputy, Rick Gates, as well as the people Stone tried to enlist in his scheme to obtain the emails from WikiLeaks.

Another problem with the defense of Russiagate is that it overlooks the pernicious role Steele's dossier played in both the public perception of Trump's legitimacy and the FBI's investigation.

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to justify publishing the dossier after Trump had been sworn in. And countless news organizations followed Buzzfeed’s lead.

There were exceptions. Bob Woodward dismissed the dossier shortly after it was published. Frum notes that investigative journalist David Satter was an early critic of the dossier as well. But those voices were few and far between. The consensus in 2017 and 2018 was that Steele was a hero. Jane Mayer's 2018 *New Yorker* profile of the former British spy is a useful example. She presents Republican efforts to discredit the dossier as nothing less than slander. Sheldon Whitehouse, the Democratic senator from Rhode Island, told her, “To impeach Steele's dossier is to impeach Mueller's investigation.” Mayer also interpreted the string of early victories for Mueller's team in forcing various official to plead out to lesser charges as evidence that Steele's research was checking out. “It's getting harder every day to claim that Steele was simply spreading lies, now that three former Trump campaign officials . . . have all pleaded guilty to criminal charges, and appear to be cooperating with the investigation,” she wrote.

This brings us to the FBI's role in this debacle. By the time Mayer wrote her profile of Steele, FBI agents knew that the dossier was garbage. We know this from a report issued by the inspector general at the Department of Justice, Michael Horowitz, in December 2019. First, Horowitz revealed that the bureau had determined by the end of 2017 that Steele's supposed value as a source for earlier FBI investigations was far less meaningful than FBI personnel had initially been led to believe. And Horowitz found that the FBI proved unable to verify anything in the dossier aside from what had already been publicly known. Steele's primary source, Danchenko, had backed away from several of its most explosive claims.

Considering that James Comey, who served as FBI director from 2013 to 2017, had broken precedent and announced ongoing investigations into both Clinton in 2016 and then Trump three months into his presidency in 2017, it's a mystery why the FBI didn't bother to tell Congress or the public that its own reporting on Steele had turned up nothing. Instead, Comey allowed Steele’s slander to linger.

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The first of these indictments, against Clinton campaign lawyer Michael Sussmann, says Sussmann presented a white paper detailing unusual communications between the computer servers of the Trump...
organization and Russia’s Alfa Bank. The bureau determined that there was nothing to it. Durham alleges (and Sussmann’s lawyers have disputed) that the researchers who helped produce the white paper found its claims to be overblown. Sussmann is charged with lying to the FBI’s general counsel, James Baker, because Durham says Sussmann concealed the fact that he was billing the Clinton campaign when he brought the white paper to Baker’s attention.

The indictment of Igor Danchenko alleges that Danchenko fabricated a source. Danchenko claimed that a Belarussian real-estate developer named Sergei Millian had revealed the Trump-Russia conspiracy to him. But it turns out Danchenko never spoke to Millian. And Durham says Danchenko deceived the bureau about his relationship with Charles Dolan, the Clinton insider, who appears to be at least one of the sources for the infamous allegation that the Kremlin has a video of Trump consorting with prostitutes (the “pee tape”). Another dossier source was a Clinton supporter who had hoped to get a job in her administration after the election. Danchenko has pleaded not guilty to the charges.

Durham argues that the lies of Danchenko and Sussmann were consequential because they hindered the FBI’s proper evaluation of the sources of the Steele Dossier and the Alfa Bank white paper. His indictment of Danchenko says these deceits “deprived FBI agents and analysts of probative information . . . that would have, among other things, assisted them in evaluating the credibility, reliability, and veracity” of the dossier. That in itself is a damning indictment of not only Danchenko and Sussmann, but also Comey and other FBI leaders who were determined to give so much credibility to a document based on the word of a fabricator in the first place.

Those who continue to insist that the only scandal is a relationship between Russia and the Trump campaign that has been the subject of five years of relentless investigation are in danger of indicting themselves. Durham will soon complete his narrative report on the involvement of the Clinton campaign in this apparently dirty trick that wreaked unjustified havoc on the lives of people like Page and Papadopoulos and that has smashed the FBI’s credibility to smithereens. We might then see how much the Russiagate clingers care about norms when it is Trump’s opponents who have violated them.

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John Durham argues that the lies of Igor Danchenko and Michael Sussmann hindered the FBI’s proper evaluation of the sources of the Steele Dossier.
The Horrifying Misuse of Foster Care

A false alternative to criminal justice is a threat to those most in need

By Greg McKay and Naomi Schaefer Riley

IN NOVEMBER 2018, a 14-year-old with a criminal record used a handgun to rob a Subway fast-food joint in Maricopa County, Arizona. He was charged with armed robbery. Despite a request from the county attorney's office to detain the boy, he was ordered by a court into the custody of the Arizona Department of Child Safety (ADCS) and placed in a foster home with abused and neglected children. His case was not an outlier.

That same month, a 17-year-old was charged with sexually assaulting his female cousins, who were eight and seven. But instead of being sent to a juvenile or adult detention facility—the mother of one of the girls testified to the devastating effect the assault had on her daughters and the risk he posed to others—he was also ordered into the custody of ADCS and placed in a foster home with other children.

Then there was the case of 17-year-old Fernando Sanchez, who exhibited a series of escalating felony behaviors. While on probation, Sanchez had not only committed new crimes but also had cut off his ankle monitor. Rather than detain him, authorities sent Sanchez into the custody of ADCS. He ran off as he was leaving the courthouse with his social worker. A few

Greg McKay served as the director of Arizona’s Department of Child Safety from 2015 to 2019, after serving as a homicide detective on the Phoenix police force for 20 years. Naomi Schaefer Riley is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. Her new book is No Way to Treat a Child: How the Foster Care System, Family Courts, and Racial Activists Are Wrecking Young Lives.

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days later, he committed a drive-by shooting. He is currently on trial for murdering a young woman.

Perhaps the worst case was that of Francisco Shadmu Foley Jr., a 17-year-old repeat offender. He was on a crime spree—committing robberies, aggravated assaults, and attempted sexual assaults. Despite impassioned pleas from ADCS that they could not put him back in a foster home—he had run away multiple times already—the court ordered him back into the custody of foster care. While his social worker drove Foley to yet another foster home, he ran from her car while stopped at a traffic light. He was arrested shortly thereafter for raping and murdering a woman, her bludgeoned body found by a passerby.

Foley is now in prison with a release date of November 2035 and has already racked up seven guilty verdicts for misconduct while locked up. Putting aside the fact that the violent felonies he committed, leading up to raping and killing a woman, led to only a 15-year prison term, the question is whether placing him in juvenile detention and some kind of treatment program could have changed the outcome for Foley or his victims. We will never know because he was repeatedly diverted to foster care instead.

Our child-protection system is supposed to protect vulnerable children—children whose parents abuse them or are unable or unwilling to care for them. A foster home is either a private home or a congregate-care facility where abused, neglected, or abandoned children are placed by a government agency for temporary care.

But in the current political environment, that system has just become another off-ramp to divert young criminals from punishment. Perhaps even worse than plans to defund the police, eliminate cash bail, and promote “reparative justice” over incarceration, sending juvenile defendants into the foster-care system puts them into close contact with our most vulnerable populations. And the system lacks any kind of rehabilitative services that juvenile delinquents are supposed to receive to prevent escalating criminal behaviors.

In other states, even older youth who may have started out in the foster system but are committing an escalating series of violent acts are not being processed in the criminal-justice system because that is seen as unacceptably punitive. Instead, they remain in less restrictive settings in foster care. In some cases, they are placed in foster homes with other kids who are then vulnerable to attack. This may have been what happened in the case of Ma’Khia Bryant, the Ohio teen who was shot by police as she tried to stab another girl. Police reports show an escalating series of physical altercations taking place in the foster home where she lived; officer were called to the location multiple times. Though juvenile records are sealed, it seems more than likely that at least one of the girls living there had been in trouble with the law.

If authorities cannot find a foster home for these more dangerous youth, then they may remain in child-welfare offices. In Texas, over 400 foster kids this year slept in offices many of them supervised by former law-enforcement officials because the young people were too violent to be placed in regular foster families.

All of these actions are placing foster children, foster families, and caseworkers in danger. And we have only ourselves to blame. A series of poor policy decisions over the past half century has led us to this place.

The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 called for a “deinstitutionalization” of juvenile “status offenders,” requiring them to be removed from secure detention facilities. A “status offender” is defined as a truant, a curfew violator, a runaway, or a minor in possession of alcohol or tobacco. Who could disagree with this? The mere thought of a child being jailed for such offenses is heartbreaking. Even expanding the intent behind this act to prevent delinquencies involving misdemeanors from resulting in jail time seemed prudent in most cases.

Today, however, we find that the pendulum has swung wildly to mitigate jail or detention for felonies involving violent or sexual crimes. What started with status offenses before moving on to misdemeanors now includes diversion from criminal-justice systems for violent, sexual, and repeat offenders. The foster-care system has become the repository for delinquents. But many of these young people do not meet the basic qualifications for the system. They are not without parents, and they are not victims of child abuse.
When delinquency is diverted to the foster-care system, many things happen or, rather, don’t happen. Delinquents do not get rehabilitation, and they have free rein in a system of care that is not secure. There are no bars in foster homes. Vulnerable foster children and the birth children of foster parents are victimized by those supposedly in state protective care. Imagine this: The government responds to child abuse, removes children from their birth parents because of danger, and places the children in an equally dangerous environment with a delinquent felon—or numerous delinquent felons, in the case of group homes. This is a moral and statutory abrogation of government’s duty to provide safety and well-being to abused and neglected children.

Child protection and foster care are funded by a variety of sources. Title IV-E is the section of the federal Social Security Act that makes tax dollars available to states for foster care and adoption programs. For every dollar the state spends on foster care, the federal government matches it. But no such program exists for delinquency. The cost of detention and treatment for young criminals is borne by state and county courts and the juvenile justice system. Therefore, if a judge orders detention, the local jurisdiction must absorb the costs. But if the judge diverts the delinquent into foster care, the state and the federal government get the bill.

The funds allocated to the foster-care system do not treat the child; rather, they treat the child’s troubled parents. How so? The goal of foster care is to house dependent children temporarily and safely until the issues with their birth parents can be resolved. This money also pays for the cost of living for the foster child—including things such as the daily bed rate, food, clothing, and school expenses. In the event the child cannot be safely returned to birth parents, this money subsidizes adoption.

Nothing in this funding covers the treatment of delinquent behavior.

Placing young people who have committed felonies into a system without rehabilitation is likely to make matters worse. The past several years have seen a dramatic rise in juvenile crime and a dramatic drop in juvenile detention. Homicide cases in juvenile courts jumped 35 percent between 2014 and 2018. While it is hard to know the precise national measure of juvenile crime—it can be difficult for someone reporting a crime to know whether the offender was legally a juvenile—we have seen real spikes in violent juvenile crime across the country in recent years.

An AP article on the spike in violent crime among youth in Connecticut, for instance, noted an increase in car thefts, robberies, and shootings. Some attributed the rise to kids not being in school as a result of the pandemic. But there's more than playing hooky going on here. In New Haven, there were 19 murders as of the beginning of November in 2020, up from 10 during the same period in 2019. Assaults with firearm were up 39 percent, and robberies with firearm increased 23 percent. In Hartford, shooting incidents increased 58 percent to more than 200 in 2020 over the year before.

Carjackings by juveniles have been making the news as well. According to an NPR report, in Minneapolis, there were 405 carjackings last year, more than triple the number in 2019. The suspects arrested were often juveniles between the ages of 11 and 17. Other cities saw huge increases, too, including New Orleans, Kansas City, Louisville, and Washington. Last year in Chicago, there were 1,400 carjackings, and police there say juveniles were involved in nearly half of those incidents. In March, a 15-year-old and a 13-year-old girl were charged with murder in the fatal carjacking of an Uber driver after the pair used a stun gun on him.

Even while all these crimes seem to be on the rise, the number of arrests and the level of punishment for juvenile offenders seem to be dropping precipitously. A few states are trying to raise the age at which young people can be tried as adults. Washington, for instance, no longer allows 16- or 17-year-olds to be automatically charged in adult court when they commit violent crimes. But some states are raising the age at which young people can still be charged as a juvenile to 20. The city council in Washington, D.C., passed a bill that would allow judges to determine whether offenders who were younger than 25 at the time of their crimes and who have served at least 15 years—no matter how violent their offense—deserve early release. Under such a law, the Parkland shooter, for instance, would serve no more than 15 years for killing 17 students and wounding 17 others.
Now, with few if any consequences for their actions, it’s not clear whether low-level offenders are really getting the message that they have done anything wrong.

And this is if they get charged at all. Many jurisdictions have turned to “restorative justice” practices as a way to handle juvenile offenders. Asking young people to make amends in the community as opposed to placing them in a juvenile-detention facility seems like a reasonable approach to low-level offenders. But the evidence on this practice is questionable for repeat violent ones.

Also, it may be that low-level offenders were once “scared straight” by these punishments before their crimes seriously escalated. Now, with few if any consequences for their actions, it’s not clear whether they are really getting the message that they have done anything wrong. And frankly, it’s not only the kids who need to be scared. Sometimes it’s the parents, too. When offenses are minor, getting a parent’s attention can sometimes make the difference between a child getting on the right path and remaining on the wrong one. The parents who have thrown up their hands and allowed their children to be taken into the foster-care system because they cannot handle their escalating behaviors might have intervened earlier if the consequences had been more serious.

By putting these young people into foster care instead of the criminal-justice system, we are postponing any real decisions about how to handle their behaviors. Our leaders seem to be guided by a kind of magical thinking that assumes that if we ignore the severe problems of children and teens and restrict the options for their placement, then they will be rehabilitated—or no one will see their problems as severe.

Much of what is driving this conversation has been the need to fill racial disparities in both systems, to make the numbers come out even on our spreadsheets. And so rather than look at the fact that crime is committed at different rates in different racial and ethnic communities or that the factors driving foster care (broken families, poverty, substance abuse) are not proportionately distributed across the population, we are simply ignoring populations in need.

Neither the child-welfare nor the criminal-justice system is simply about punishment. Both are about protection as well. We are serving the most vulnerable members of the population—in schools, in families, in neighborhoods—by keeping them safe from those who mean them harm. But it is those vulnerable kids and families whose voices are often lost when these policies are put in place.

It is not uncommon these days to hear criticism of the “foster-care-to-prison pipeline”—or “crossover youth.” Academics and child-welfare officials have become convinced that foster care is somehow leading young people into the criminal-justice system. Indeed, one survey found that one in six inmates in the California state prison system had spent time in foster care. But correlation does not equal causation. There is no evidence that the child-welfare system—as much as it may be in need of reform—is at the root of the problem. Rather, it is important to think about all the abuse, neglect, and other trauma that have brought children to the attention of child-welfare officials in the first place. And then we can add to that the kids who were already involved with the criminal-justice system before they entered foster care. More significant if you put teenage violent offenders into foster care, then the pipeline becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy.

It is time for prosecutors and judges to stop shunting the problem of juvenile offenders onto an already overburdened, underfunded (and in need of reform) foster-care system. By offloading the responsibility, they might be satisfying the demands of progressive ideologues, but this comes at the expense of protecting the most vulnerable. It is time to start intervening earlier in the criminal trajectories of these youth, ensuring that they are given real consequences and offered real chances at rehabilitation before their acts escalate.
The Last Days of Legacy-Media Disco

All the expenses fit to submit and other memories of my halcyon days in print

By Rick Marin

In 1994, I came in from the freelance-writer cold and took a job at Newsweek. I spent the next four-plus years there, followed by two and a half at the New York Times before I wrapped up my career in legacy media to write a book and try to make it in Hollywood. Not a decision I regret, but one I look back on with a mixture of nostalgia and amazement that print journalism still meant something back then—even if it didn’t mean quite as much as it thought it did. I caught the very last of those halcyon days when it was still, above all else, fun.

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I’d had regular gigs before. After graduating from Columbia’s School of Journalism, I interned for a year at Harper's magazine, under Commentary’s own Terry Teachout, who was at the time a senior editor and the magazine’s token conservative. I toiled on an electronic typewriter in a windowless broom closet across from the upper-masthead guys. Eric Etheridge, an affable young Mississippian, always seemed buried under the data he culled to produce the popular Harper’s Index. Down the hall were Gerry Marzorati, who moved in rarifie literary and art-world circles with an aloof stylishness I coveted, and Michael Pollan, who was nice to everyone and, most impressive to me at the time, the brother of Tracy Pollan, who played Michael J. Fox’s girlfriend on the sitcom Family Ties. Everyone
would go on to bigger and better. Pollan became a bestselling author of books on gastronomic, then psychedelc, science. Our intern was Fareed Zakaria, now chief foreign-affairs pundit at CNN.

The editor in chief who led the magazine's '80s revival was Lewis Lapham. He define intellectual shabby chic, banging out his contrarian columns on an old manual typewriter while fending off creditors. Born into old San Francisco money that must have evaporated, he was supported by a rich wife, yet always seemed on the verge of ruin. His life was very Bonfire of the Vanities, which came out the year I was there (1987). But he pulled it off with panache, an Elaine's élan, and a resonant smoker's voice. He once signaled his disdain for a piece I'd championed by tapping ash from his cigarette on its cover page.

I sensed it was time to move on.

I'D BEEN supplementing my $14,000-a-year Harper's salary with a little freelancing on the side, for the American Spectator and the Washington Times. That riposte to the Washington Post, owned by Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church, had offered Terry a job as its TV critic. Too lowbrow for him, but he suggested me. So my new bride and I (it was a whirlwind Harper's romance in which my Toronto-born need for a green card played a role) moved to D.C. There I learned to crank out pieces on a daily deadline—an invaluable skill I'm still grateful for today.

The editor in chief was a suave, perma-tanned Belgian named Arnaud de Borchgrave. Arnaud had been Newsweek's Vietnam correspondent and had a Murphy bed installed in his office alongside uniforms of various foreign militaries, readying him on a moment's notice to be "wheels up" to some global hot spot. Despite his exotic journalistic pedigree, Arnaud was no snob. Unlike the insufferably elitist New York Times poohbahs I'd encounter later in my career.

The Washington Times's Arnaud de Borchgrave was no snob, unlike the elitist New York Times poohbahs I'd encounter later in my career.

serious talent. David Brooks was the movie critic. Pop music was the domain of David Mills, a talented black reporter who made national headlines calling out the anti-Semitism of the rap group Public Enemy. Mills later segued into TV with his old Baltimore Sun colleague David Simon on a series called The Corner, the precursor to The Wire. (He'd win an Emmy later and die tragically of an aneurysm on the set of Simon's show Treme at the age of 46.) Malcolm Gladwell worked at Insight—a newsweekly published on the mezzanine floor of our big open newsroom, which had a wall of windows on the Washington Arboretum. Full disclosure, the Life section, then Insight, were run by Commentary's current editor, John Podhoretz, who was for three years my boss until a broken marriage and career restlessness led me back to New York. I'd contributed a couple of pieces to Spy (for my fellow Canadian Graydon Carter) and decided to see whether I could make it as a full-time freelancer.

ARMED WITH a mini-cassette tape recorder and a stack of "Reporter's Notebooks" (both items that could now be relegated to the Smithsonian), I operated out of a fif-th floor walk-up on West 25th Street in what I called "The Sewing Machine Repair Shop District." From my Newsroom of One, I set out to be the most prolific writer in New York. At my peak, I published a hundred pieces in a year. Covers for TV Guide (which paid the best). Features for GQ, Vogue, Condé Nast Traveler. I did "The Rolling Stone Interview" with Howard Stern, and an Interview interview with his sidekick, Robin Quivers. I Jet-Skied with Vanilla Ice, wrote a monthly advice column on men for Made-moiselle under the pseudonym Jim Dixon (in tribute to Kingsley Amis). My mantra (stolen from S.J. Perelman) was "Faster than anyone better than me and better than anyone faster than me." I didn't have much trouble getting assignments because I delivered clean, on-time copy with no drama. Of course, there were long nights of angst and schadenfreude and other German emotions. Why couldn't I crack the New Yorker? Why wasn't I making $5-a-word? Who was making $5 a word?

I drowned those glossy sorrows with $4 bottles of Beck's at my Elaine's, a dive called Billy's Topless. I might still be there, if they hadn't torn down Billy's to put in a bagel place. And if Newsweek hadn't come calling. Time's perennial competitor hired me as a "general editor" (which meant writer) to cover TV and pop culture for the Lifestyle section in what was known as...
“the back of the book.” I got my own office (remember offices? with my name on the door. I wore a jacket and ’90s skinny tie to work. That was not mandatory, but I was so elated to have a job that I enjoyed looking the part. My boss was a mensch named John Capouya, who’d come from <em>Newsday</em>, the Long Island–based paper. The son of an academic, John looked like a bearded Richard Gere, had a pigeon-toed basketball-guy walk and a laid-back vibe. He, too, seemed happy to have escaped the ink-stained trenches of newspapering for a world of weekly, not daily, deadlines that allowed plenty of time for long expense-account lunches.

Our regular haunt was Gabriel's, a high-end trattoria on the north side of Columbus Circle. Half a dozen of us from the Lifestyle and Business sections would eat, drink, and do what journalists love to do most: gossip. As in, complain about our superiors, the so-called Wallendas who ran the magazine. When the bill came, someone's corporate card came out, and we paid sardonic lip service to our benefactors at the Washington Post Company and the Graham dynasty that controlled it and owned <em>Newsweek</em>. Then we made our way back to the office around 3 o'clock and pretended to work until the whistle blew. I can still taste that mushroom risotto.

This was not pure idleness. There really wasn’t much for the writers and editors to do until the end of the week, when the magazine “closed.” Like <em>Time</em>, which invented the form, <em>Newsweek</em> ran on a caste system of “reporters” and “writers.” The reporters would run around interviewing people and compiling research that they would present in a voluminous “file” to the writer. The writer condensed the file into a zippy, readable number of “columns”—the unit measure of a story, depending on the size of the piece. For our section, that happened on Fridays (Saturdays for the newser “front of the book”) and meant sticking around for dinner on Friday nights while the Wallendas had their way with your copy. And by dinner, I don’t mean random take-out orders wolfed down at your desk. I’m talking a full catered meal in the <em>Newsweek</em> dining room. At <em>Time</em>, a drinks cart used to make the rounds on closing nights. Allegedly at <em>Newsweek</em> too, but by the time I got there, the magazine had moved from Madison Avenue to Columbus Circle and left some of its louche Mad Men customs behind.

Friday nights could go late, so town cars were provided to see staffers home safely. I liked to push this privilege. As I mentioned, I’m fast. One night, I’d polished off my piece early and there was a party for a ’zine (another bygone artifact) called <em>Paris in the ’20s</em> whose supremely dry form of journalistic satire was to excerpt verbatim ridiculous bits from the <em>New York Times</em>. As a single guy always on the lookout for female fans of dry journalistic satire, I didn’t want to miss the party. So while my colleagues sweated their deadlines, I took a town car downtown, hung out for an hour, then called another car to bring me back up to <em>Newsweek</em> to close my cover story on the so-called Wallendas who run the magazine. When I pushed further. One summer, I had a “share house” in the Hamptons, so come Friday night, I took a car service the full two hours from Manhattan to Sagaponack.

In all my time at <em>Newsweek</em>, no one questioned an expense. On the contrary, my editor, Capouya, once called a staff meeting and scolded us for not using our expense accounts enough: “How are you gonna get story ideas if you don’t take anyone out to lunch?” Actually, he didn’t scold all of us. Apparently, I was the only one of us blowing sufficient quantities of Post Co. dough every month: “Now Rick here is doing it right.” I suggested we lunch at Gabriel’s to discuss.

A final note about the largesse that made <em>Newsweek</em> such a collegial place to work: Any work-related fligh over three hours, you fly Business. Not until I got into TV and joined the Writers Guild would I again enjoy flyin “warm-nuts class” on someone else’s dime.

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I had escaped the ink-stained trenches of newspapering for a world of weekly, not daily, deadlines that allowed plenty of time for long expense-account lunches.

The <em>X-Files</em> or <em>South Park</em> or JFK Jr.’s girlfriend or whatever it was that week. No one batted an eye. Emboldened, I pushed further. One summer, I had a “share house” in the Hamptons, so come Friday night, I took a car service the full two hours from Manhattan to Sagaponack.

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At NEWSWEEK, I’d enjoyed commanding views of the Manhattan skyline from my 17th-floor office. At the <em>Times</em>, I was ushered to a grimy cu-
The struggle against pomposity at the New York Times was real. Any time I pitched a story, I’d be challenged to ensure its Times-worthiness.

to write. This Talmudic rule, like many at the Times, was never enforced. But Ilene, in her sauciness, liked to tempt fate by trying to make out with me whenever we were alone in the elevator, waiting until the doors had started opening to cease her molestation. As girlfriend-editors go, I give her high marks. Ilene was the one who sent me to L.A. to hang out at the Playboy Mansion. When you’re lucky enough to find a woman like that, you have to marry her. A few years later, I did. We now have two kids and a dog.

The Style Department shared the third floor with Sports—unlikely bedfellows. Someone in Sports was always holding a phone in the air and shouting, Anyone for Bustaaah? As in Buster Olney, the baseball columnist. The boxes of half-eaten pizza they always seemed to have over there may have explained the mousetraps under our cubicles.

One of the reasons SundayStyles was so popular was the wedding announcements. My proximity to the Keebler Elves who put out this antiquated social diary every week made me a hero at a friend’s wedding. It was a Friday evening, and before I left for the rehearsal dinner, I asked the Copy Desk if I could peek at one of that Sunday’s entries. Sure enough, there was my friend’s name, his bride, and a brief account of their romance—below a picture of two completely different people. I asked for a page proof of the botched announcement and took it to the dinner. After letting the bride die a thousand deaths inside—she and her mother had waited their whole lives for the wedding announcement in the Times—I announced that I’d saved the day and fixed the mistake. I also spared the offending copy editor a public flogging in the Times’ dreaded Corrections box.

The Copy Desk, manned by long-suffering lifers, was low-hanging fruit for mockery and abuse. Its staffers were zealous guardians of all things “Times-ian.” I was once denied the word “addled,” because in some long-lost medieval etymology, it was considered a synonym for urination. It wasn’t really their fault. They were merely the lowest receptacle of the self-regard that trickled down from the top.

When Howell Raines was promoted to the job of executive editor, his predecessor, Joe Lelyveld, led him on a tour of the newsroom. As they stopped in the Style Department, I overheard Lelyveld tell Raines to take a good look around, because it would be the last time he’d be setting foot in here. We were flu f, they were news. Never mind that we actually made the paper money—our section was fat with ads—and that it would be Raines who disgraced it with the hiring and promotion of a plagiarist named Jayson Blair.

The struggle against pomposity at the Times was real. Any time I pitched a story, I’d be challenged to ensure its Times-worthiness. Like when I pitched Larry David. My final cover story at Newsweek had been on the last episode of Seinfeld. I spent 10 days on the set, most of it kibbitzing with Larry, the show’s co-creator, who was vastly more entertaining and pleasant than the weird and standoffish Jerry Seinfeld. So when HBO gave Larry his own show, I suggested a profile This notion was met with extreme skepticism from Trip, my editor: Hmm. I don’t know. Larry who? I prevailed. Curb Your Enthusiasm has run for the past 20 years.

For all its stuffiness there were still some classic, old-timey characters around the place. The mail carts were pushed by ancient pressmen in white smocks, whom technology had rendered redundant but whose union made unfire-able. I loved Mort, the photos guy, who wore huge black horn-rims and dropped Catch 22—isms such as “FUBAR” and “SNAFU” as he hurried about his business. When I did my first (and last) Page One feature—a dispatch from a convention of stay-at-home dads—I was presented with the metal plate used to print the page.

Another great thing about the Times: Everybody returns your call, no matter how dumb the story. I was reporting a trend piece on the complexity of male greetings: the dap, the fihump, the bro hug. I’d heard that Donald Trump, then a mere real-estate mogul, was a major germophobe, so I put in a call to his office Within seconds, he was giving me his take on how to glad-hand without physical contact, a habit he paradoxically eschewed during the pandemic. The crazy
thing was, such was the monolithic ubiquity of the *Times* in New York that you’d write a story like that, and *everyone* would read it. You could make someone’s day by putting them in a piece. Or the opposite. When I found out that the congenitally exclusionary restaurateur Keith McNally had a top-secret reservation line for his boldface bistro, Balthazar, I published the number. That enraged him and made me feel like a nightlife Robin Hood.

Despite the paper’s unequivocally liberal bent, 20 years ago we were pre-woke, pre-#MeToo. No diversity directives were imposed on our section, which largely covered and (my goal) *épatée*’d the New York bourgeoisie. I wrote about Amish chic and $400-a-day cleaning ladies, lamented the rise of the G-rated bachelor party, and covered the pointless excess of the $1 million fish tank. I DJ’d at a Chanel store opening in Soho and became the paper’s first Burning Man correspondent.

My last piece in the *Times* was published a week before 9/11 would make the trend pieces that had been my trade for the past decade (*Soup is the new coffee!*?) seem rather…beside the point. A piece on my fetish for Bic four-color pens and another on my annual addiction to the 1951 Alastair Sim version of *A Christmas Carol* were among my most popular. I was a devoted fan of the writer Bruce Jay Friedman, so I talked Trip into a profile of him whose paper-thin news peg was a reissue of Friedman’s novels and short stories. I don’t know how many readers were dying for that one, but it gave me a lifelong friend and mentor. On Valentine’s Day, my soon-to-be-wife Ilene and I wrote dueling screeds about “Women with Commitment-phobia” and “Men Whose Biological Clocks Are Ticking.” Off of that, I persuaded the section to give me my own column, called “Beta Male,” mostly because I hoped I could use it to sell a TV show. That never happened, but one of my rants, “Why Sane Men Love Crazy Women,” became the basis for a memoir I would leave the *Times* to write.

I was done telling other people’s stories. I wanted to tell my own. And I never looked back. Writing for television is a terrible feast-or-famine business. But my colleagues who stayed in print had it worse. They watched budgets shrink or disappear.

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**Commentary**

When I applied to Columbia Journalism School in the mid-’80s, you had to come to New York, sit in a classroom with typewriters on the desks, and bang out a response to a New York Times editorial in something like two minutes. It was as much a typing test as a writing test. By the time I was accepted, a few months later, the typewriters were already gone, replaced by enormous clunky computers with five-inc flopp disks that were constantly deleting hours of hard work. Computers made news-rooms quieter, but they were still lively, cluttered hives of humanity at its best and worst. They taught me to write in the middle of chaos. No Hollywood deadline compares with an editor breathing down your neck to turn in your copy in five minutes or they’ll have to run a “house ad” where your story was supposed to be. *Oh, and make it funny.*

Working at the *Times* took me as far as I could go from that typewriter at Columbia. It also gave me the keys to the city. I went to any event, all the best restaurants, and had carte blanche to write about pretty much whatever I wanted. When I file my story, I was done for the day. Those days are long gone. A mom on my kid’s old baseball team works for *People.* At every game, she was on her phone—endlessly posting, re-editing, updating. Whatever journalism has turned into now, one thing it doesn’t look like is fun.
I STARTED reading The Deep Places, Ross Douthat’s astonishing new memoir, while sunk into a large chair in a small room in the basement of a medical-imaging center on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. Like all good horror stories, The Deep Places begins in daylight, the better to accentuate the darkness that will soon fall: Here are Ross, who is a columnist for the New York Times, and his wife, Abby, a brilliant science writer, leaving behind the muggy thicket of Washington, D.C., for a New England farmhouse, complete with sunken stone fences and apple trees and promises of children running happy and free while adults plant lovely gardens and count their blessings.

Before the Douthats could even pack, though, I was interrupted by a nurse carrying a small case. Inside it was a bulbous syringe made of metal, a cylindrical and menacing contraption that looked as if it belonged on the Magic Mountain, not in an upscale medical suite across the street from Sotheby’s. She injected me with what she assured me, in a cheerful tone, was just radioactive sugar and told me that, as I would continue to be radioactive for a little while, it would be better if I didn’t return home to my young children for at least eight hours. Then she left me with a gargantuan bottle of barium—drink it as fast as you can, she said, and you won’t even notice the taste—and my book.

If you’re looking for a pithy summary, here goes: Ross finds something he thinks might be a boil. It’s painful, but he thinks nothing of it. Then his symptoms worsen. There’s pain in his chest and a gagging feeling in his throat and...
In the book’s early chapters, Douthat approaches his illness as you’d expect of a Harvard-educated member in good standing of the upper middle class: I’m sick, he thinks, and science will find a way to cure me. But “science,” he soon learns, is a complicated construct, “filter through fallible institutions, politicized processes, and bureaucratic incentives.” Public health officials set clumsy criteria for defining Lyme, which then affect official diagnoses, which, in turn, determine which studies get funded and which do not, which leaves hundreds of thousands of people howling in pain with no recourse and no sense that anyone is listening to them.

At least 30 percent of Lyme patients are still misdiagnosed with false negatives, and little to no research exists to help chronic patients, like Douthat or me, understand why they’re experiencing strange symptoms for months or years after their bacterial infection is official treated. It’s all in your head, Douthat’s doctors tell him before offering Xanax or the phone number of a good shrink. I’ve heard the same thing more than once.

At any other point in time, a book like The Deep Places might’ve sunk to the bottom of the reading pile, a niche title for people who, for one reason or another, have a particular interest in the subject matter, the author, or both. But then came COVID-19, and suddenly Douthat’s book wasn’t really about chronic Lyme anymore, or at least not entirely.

“My own case to one side,” he writes, “the coronavirus era soon came to feel like a shattered mirror of the tick-borne epidemic and its controversies, with different pieces of the Lyme wars reflected and refracted in different aspects of the worldwide COVID crisis. Things that came as a surprise to people for whom modern medicine was still a stable floor—testing that didn’t work, the confident medical advice that had to be reversed and then reversed again, the wild uncertainty about how, and for how long, a single pathogen’s symptomatic effects might manifest themselves—were completely unsurprising to me by now.”

Having watched our self-appointed intellectual betters dismiss too many Lyme treatments that, upon independent inquiry, turned out to be grounded in observable reality, Douthat wasn’t surprised that too many theories initially dismissed as conspiratorial—see under “Wuhan lab leak”—eventually emerged as plausible and even probable.

Our Collective Story, then, begins where his personal account ends. Ross gets better, but the long and lonely nightmare that had sucked up more than half a decade of his life is now our everyday reality. Read the book with this in mind, and you realize that it’s a travelogue capturing not one destination but two.

The first, to borrow the title of one chapter, is “the country of suffering,” the state of experiencing both chronic pain and the suffocating feeling that no one around you knows how to help or even relate. The second, to borrow the title of a recent essay in Tablet by Alana Newhouse, is an America where everything is broken. Douthat’s day job as a columnist peaks through the cracks of the book, with the occasional reference to the national drama unfolding alongside his medical ordeal, the rise of Donald Trump. He’s too soulful a storyteller to lump both together crudely—the vicious little tick and the divisive politician—but he doesn’t have to; the sense of a nation collapsing under its own delusions is palpable.
The men and women who glance at Douthat's charts and then dismiss his suffering, you realize, belong to the same benighted class—rich in education and disposable income, impoverished when it comes to self-awareness and humility—as the political prognosticators who snoozed as millions of Americans struggled with painfully real hardships, and who were then surprised when the body politic became gripped with what still feels like a chronic inflammation.

This same brood of smug Brahmins still produces the news we read, the curricula we administer to our children, and the movies we watch late at night when we're tired and need a short escape. Its members, flash in their credentials, are still the ones diagnosing us when we're sick and shaping our economic reality when we're healthy. And if you've read Douthat's book or paid any attention to them these past two years of crisis, you know that they're not in the business of listening to you or learning from their own mistakes—which is why, everywhere you look, everything seems as if it just doesn't work, or at least doesn't work for you.

Chronic patients have this realization thrust upon them. We have no choice. When one lovely and caring physician informed me that I was functionally sick—by that point, I'd lost more than a third of my body mass and four months to extreme pain, and was now living with no appetite, a gaggle of gastrointestinal catastrophes, and a monthly bout, like a menstrual cycle, of high fevers and uncontrollable shaking that goes on for days—but medically healthy, I froze.

What he was really telling me, I understood, wasn't just "we don't know what's wrong with you." What he was saying was "we have no way of knowing what's wrong with you." The first statement leaves open the possibility of discovery—the pendulum will swing and a wise diagnostician will emerge in the third act with a eureka and a happy ending. The second demands a radical readjustment of expectations, an understanding, as metaphysical as it is practical, that the crisis we face is profound, systemic, and all-permeating.

"When the crisis simply continues without resolution," Douthat writes, "when the illness grinds on and on and on—well, then a curtain tends to fall, because there isn't an obvious way to integrate that kind of struggle into the realm of everyday life." Family members and friends don't know what, exactly, they're supposed to do to ease a loved one's suffering. And sunny Americans accustomed to thinking that theirs was a nation that could buffer them from any real hardship and offer them meaningful if not always perfect remedies to problems physical and emotional don't know what, exactly, they're supposed to do to fill all that they now see shattered.

How do we do it? What's the prescription? Read Douthat, and let him tell you that it's all in the journey. First, you acknowledge the depth of both the dysfunction and your own despair. Second, you learn to see others you might've never otherwise considered worth noting, to say nothing of embracing.

In one of the book's most moving passages, Douthat goes to see a woman he calls the Magnetizer, whose treatment and opinions alike veer way off the course of anything accepted by the medical consensus. His prior, pre-sickness self, he candidly admits, might've dismissed the woman as a fringe figure "My new self, though," he writes, "regarded her radical openness rather differently—as a feature of the kind of mind that was more likely than the rest of us to grope its way to veiled or disreputable truths." Give that mind too much freedom, he admits, and it might spiral into hazy claims about chemtrails and black helicopters in the sky. "But exclude such openness entirely," he continues, "and you end up with the mindset that I had encountered across my months of frustration, where the absence of an exact test result matching a set of bureaucratic criteria meant that doctor after doctor would spread their hands, hint that you were crazy, and abandon you to pain."

The Magnetizer did no such thing, which brings us to the book's third and final prescriptive point of light: Once you acknowledge the brokenness, and once you learn to listen to the people your privileged position in life taught you to ignore, you realize just how many are huddled right there with you, ready to rebuild whatever had fallen apart.

I finish the book in outdoor cafes and on park benches, walking around town and waiting for the poison to pulse out of my body so that I could safely return home and hug my wife and my kids. At some point, the doctor called with very good news: The test results came back, he said, and we can cross lymphoma off the list. I said I felt relieved but then reminded him I was still experiencing all the same symptoms that brought me to him in the first place. He said something about more tests, and I could tell he wanted to get off the phone. As far as he was concerned, my case was closed, happily so. I said something about Lyme, and I could feel him stiffen up on the other end of the line. He said something about there being no evidence and no reason to waste time, something about science. I thanked him warmly, hung up, and clutched Douthat's book. I was still sick, but I wasn't alone.▶
The Denial of Agency

The Least of Us
By Sam Quinones
Bloomsbury, 432 pages

Reviewed by
Kevin Williamson

TRUE TALES of America and Hope in the Time of Fentanyl and Meth.” So reads the subtitle of Sam Quinones’s latest, The Least of Us. I am not entirely convinced these tales are true—by which I do not at all mean to suggest that they are something other than factual, that they are inventions and fictions. Quinones is not that kind of bad writer. He is a different kind of bad writer, the kind who is capable enough—and sometimes much more than capable—when it comes to relating the stories recounted to him by the feckless sad sacks with which his terrarium of human failure is populated but, at the same time, utterly unable to organize those sad stories into anything other than the tired, hackneyed, shady-back-alleys-of-capitalism narrative that one expects from a 62-year-old Berkeley graduate.

Both men would probably loathe the comparison, but Quinones is in a sense a version of Tucker Carlson, another child of the old California aristocracy. Quinones is the son of a Harvard-educated Claremont professor, and he’s a former president of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics later appointed to the board of the National Council for the Humanities by George W. Bush—but one who offers himself as a journalistic tribune of the plebs, a voice for a marginalized underclass he knows in an essentially anthropological way, who are not his people but his profession. I do not fault Quinones for being born to privilege; I blame him only for his failure to overcome the difficulties imposed by such an upbringing.

These deficiencies are both intellectual and moral, and, consequently, narrative. The Least of Us is mainly a series of potted biographies of junkies. There is Tom Ruah, who graduated from prescription painkillers to injecting heroin and described the experience as “like seeing God.” (One of the problems with telling junkies’ stories in their own words is that their accounts are almost invariably silly and self-aggrandizing, and packed with clichés on the level of “like seeing God.”) Ruah steals and cons his way through life until dying from an overdose of acetylfentanyl. There’s Lou Ortenzio, the junkie doctor who acts as a pipeline for other addicts and dodges prison but loses his medical license, becoming a pizza deliveryman before going on to work with other recovering addicts.

And there’s Joss Sackler, a standard-issue society-page grotesque. About her, Quinones writes:

The crowd tonight is here for a performance-art piece. The piece centers around Joss Sackler. Ms. Sackler has a PhD in linguistics; she owns a clothing line; she employs an entire PR team; she is said to be very interested in “women’s issues.” She is, above all, the wife of David Sackler, who is the son of Richard Sackler. Both men had resigned from Purdue Pharma’s board of directors a year earlier.

Tonight’s event is billed as Joss et Ses Amis. That is French for “Joss and Her Friends.” But the event also has a subtitle. It’s in English: “Undeterred.”

Mrs. Sackler appears in a blue Elizabeth Kennedy evening gown, which is cut from her body piece by piece and burned as she stands on a rotating platform in the pose of an Olympic discus thrower. She is then spray-painted. The performance is photographed by Lynn Goldsmith, reported in Town & Country, and, of course, applauded. “Curated” wines are served, and Mrs. Sackler schmoozes with Keith Richards’s daughters before flashing her breasts at the audience, to additional applause.

The Sacklers are the villains of the book, and they are easy targets. Purdue Pharma’s executives and board members, the Sacklers prominent among them, took an attitude of indifference toward prescription drug abuse that was as Olympian as Joss Sackler’s discus-thrower pose. The fire has not exactly covered itself in glory. Quinones reports that opioid pain medication is “virtually its only product,” but that isn’t quite right; Dun & Bradstreet puts the sales of its Avrio Health subsidiary at about $200 million a year, enough to buy a truckload of Elizabeth Kennedy evening gowns and truckloads of curated wines. Avrio’s big products are Senokot, Colace, and Peri-Colace—all laxatives—Betadine antiseptics, and magnesium
supplements, presumably a by-product of its laxative business. That's an all-American portfolio: hillbilly heroin and laxatives, Betadine for life's little scrapes, and dietary supplements, the communion wafer in the Reformed American Church of Self-Improvement.

The Purdue story is familiar enough by this point, an easily digested (hold the Senokot!) morality tale with corporate villains in black hats. That Quinones and much of the rest of the media, and the country, have accepted this simplistic tale more or less at face value is a very good example of why it is that we 21st-century Americans, owners of vast wealth and controllers of immense power, cannot grapple in a direct way with common, longstanding social problems. It is not as though this is our first go-round with a national episode of socially destructive substance abuse. The Temperance League of yore didn't just spring up out of atavistic Puritan disgust—widespread public drunkenness and private alcoholism were major social issues in the 19th century, and not only for old-stock Protestants worried about drunken Indians and Irishmen. The commercial press at the time was full of advertisements offering miracle cures for the scourge of dipsomania, including such famous and now forgotten products as the “Double Chloride of Gold Cure for Drunkenness.”

And this is hardly our first trouble with heroin, opiates, or opioids. In the late 19th century, Bayer's heroically named compound—Heroin—was offered as a treatment for morphine addiction, among other ills. Businesses have always found a way to profit from human misery, compulsion, and decadence, and, in that sense, Purdue is not so different from Anheuser-Busch InBev, Yum! Brands, or Pornhub. The Sacklers, comical and obscene in their way, profited from human misery in a way that Purdue did not.

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Quinones, whose 2015 book Dreamland proved to be key in alerting American elites to the opioid crisis, here demonstrates an unfortunate determination to force the complex facts of social life into a simplistic morality tale. In his rendering, addiction is something that simply happens to unhappy people. Opioids may rob them of their health, their families, and even of their lives, but it is shallow moralists such as Quinones who would rob them of their humanity by recasting them as amoebae swept along by market forces.

Religious writers and preachers often run into trouble with metaphor and analogy. Because God is so mysterious and so entirely alien to the human experience, religious writers often end up leaning very heavily on metaphor. An example is the metaphor of the judge for the demanding moral aspect of God, which Christian writers in particular often internalize so thoroughly that they reduce the Almighty to something like a literal judge in a court of law. Journalists writing about complex social problems often fall victim to the same tendency, taking the metaphorical “wiring” and “rewiring” of the human brain as literal, even though the similarity of the human brain to a computer or another electronic device is only superficial and analogical. Quinones has learned a little about the neurobiology of addiction, and he writes about the brain as though it were a literal mechanical apparatus, with parts that are “shut down” by drugs. He personifies neurotransmitters and hormones: “Dopamine tells us” this, while “serotonin says” that...
This is a way of transferring the agency away from human beings to neurobiological processes. But human beings are not mechanisms, and even the most powerful social force in modern American life—by which I mean moral cowardice—is not sufficient to make them so.

Quinones's need to make everything about everything else leads him down some silly roads, i.e., his occasional clumsy forays into presenting capitalism and addiction as aspects of each other:

Drugs ... shut down the prefrontal cortex.... An addicted brain is one where a raging primitive reward system has silenced the prefrontal cortex's wise counsel. The reward system, unbalancing the natural competition among brain chemicals, gains a monopoly on the brain.

You can see the train wreck approaching, and then it arrives: “Adam Smith, in describing capitalism in The Wealth of Nations, called monopoly a ‘derangement’ and ‘hurtful to the society in which it takes place.’ That sounds to me like what’s going on in the addicted brain.” Normal stupidity cannot account for those sentences. That kind of nonsense requires a carefully cultivated mind.

I do not need reporting about opioid addiction to be a morality story that fits in with my own moral assumptions—in fact, I do not need it to be a morality story at all. I think of the placid Buddhists contemplating the end of the human species—and, hence, the end of human suffering—in Michel Houellebecq’s The Elementary Particles: “The Enlightened One, if he had meditated on it, would not necessarily have rejected a technical solution.” Mitigating destructive behavior, including the abuse of opioids and opiates, is likely to prove as much a technical (meaning medical) question as a moral one, in the long term.

What I do need is for the story not to be a morality tale with a cowboys-and-Indians level of moral sophistication that obscures the facts of the case. The Least of Us is an assault on intelligence in places, but mostly it is a missed opportunity—because there is much that is of interest in it. What happens to sugar-addicted rats when you give them a drug used to treat heroin overdoses? That very interesting scenario comes up in the book, but Quinones is too much of a dabbler—a neuroscientifi c dabbler, a moral dabbler, and a tourist—to make the most of it.

George the Great

The Last King of America: The Misunderstood Reign of George III
By Andrew Roberts
Viking, 784 pages

Reviewed by John Steele Gordon

Most Americans know only two things about King George III: that he was the British tyrant Thomas Jefferson denounced in the Declaration of Independence and that he went mad. He did indeed go mad, more than once in fact. But as Andrew Roberts shows in his magisterial new book, The Last King of America, George III was certainly no tyrant. In fact, he was constitutionally scrupulous to a fault and, unlike most monarchs of his age, lived according to the principle that duty always comes first.

It is a measure of how seriously King George III took his job that even before he came to the throne, when the 21-year-old fell in love with Lady Sarah Lennox, the exquisitely beautiful daughter of the Duke of Richmond, he gave her up. Told by his tutor, and later prime minister, Lord Bute, that marrying a subject was just not possible, George accepted Bute’s advice. “The interest of my country shall ever be my first care, my own inclinations shall ever submit to it,” George wrote to Bute. “I am born for the happiness or misery of a great country, and consequently must often act contrary to my own passions.” As Roberts notes, these words could serve as a leitmotif of his entire reign.

But Jefferson, for propaganda purposes, needed a bogeyman he could blame for the rupture with the mother country—and the king, the living symbol of British power and authority, was the obvious choice. And blame him Jefferson certainly did. The middle section of the Declaration consists of no fewer than 28 charges against the king, almost all of which, as Roberts shows, were nonsense.

Roberts writes that the 17th charge (that he had imposed taxes...
without the colonists’ consent) and the 22nd (that Parliament had been given the power to legislate for the colonies) “justified the whole rebellion on their own.”

“The other twenty-six,” Roberts writes, “were a mixture of political propaganda, hypocrisy, hyperbole, and ex post facto rationalization, tacked on to the first two paragraphs of superb prose which will justly live as long as democracy and self-government still matter in the world.”

It is Roberts’s self-appointed task here to set the record straight on George III and to give us an honest portrait, free of Jefferson’s libels. The book is, to put it mildly, a revelation.

The Hanoverian dynasty had come to the British throne in 1714 with the death of Queen Anne, the last of the Stuart monarchs. The Act of Settlement of 1701 had barred Catholics from the throne. The elector of Hanover, a state in what is today northwest Germany, was, as Anne’s second cousin, the nearest Protestant heir.

George I was 54 when he came to the throne. He never learned to speak English, and he spent much of his time in his German possessions. George II (who reigned from 1727 to 1760) learned English as a child, but spoke it with an accent. He also visited Hanover, where he had grown up, often. George III, however, had been born in England, spoke English as a native tongue (he also spoke German), and never even visited Hanover. Indeed, he rarely ventured away from the Home Counties (the area around London) and never left England. As he famously said at the start of his reign, “born and educated in this country, I glory in the name of Briton.”

Devout, conscientious, and hard-working, he drank little and ate moderately. He was far more involved with the day-to-day running of the government than later British monarchs. (He would be the last sovereign to appoint a prime minister who did not command a majority in the House of Commons and who dealt personally with the other members of the cabinet, not just with the prime minister.) He amassed a voluminous correspondence with ministers and others, often noting the time as well as the date. Not a few were written late at night.

Unlike the other Hanoverians, George III had a loving relationship with his father, Frederick, Prince of Wales, who did not live long enough to become king. This is why George III came to the throne at the age of just 22. He would have the longest reign in British history up to his time (it has been surpassed only by his granddaughter Queen Victoria, and the present queen).

The other four Hanoverian kings of Great Britain (among them George III’s two sons, George IV and William IV) were famously promiscuous. William IV had fathered no fewer than 10 illegitimate children before he married Princess Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen and settled down. (The former prime minister David Cameron is a descendant of William IV through one of his bastards.)

But George III was utterly faithful to his wife, Queen Charlotte. It had been purely an arranged marriage, and they had met for the first time only a few hours before they were married. But it turned out to be a genuine love match, and she would give him no fewer than 15 children, the largest royal brood in British history.

And while many of the Hanoverians, especially George IV, were extravagant and often deeply in debt, George III was careful with money. That doesn’t mean he was miserly. Believing that royalty required grandeur, he spent large sums on both Windsor Castle and Buckingham House (it became a palace only after Queen Victoria made it her official London residence). He collected widely in art, including over 50 Canalettos, and paintings by Vermeer, Rembrandt, Titian, Rubens, and Van Dyck, as well as drawings and 50,000 maps. Almost half the Royal Collection, the greatest collection of art in private hands in the world, was amassed by George III.

He also avidly collected books, almost 80,000, over the course of his life. They are now housed, as a special collection, in the British Library. The collection cost, it is estimated, £212,000. That was a huge sum in the 18th century. But the present-day value of the collection is simply beyond counting.

Unlike some book collectors, George III was a reader as well. He is often credited with saying to Edward Gibbon, on receiving a copy of the last volume of The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, “Scribble, scribble, scribble, ay, Mr. Gibbon?” But in fact, that was said by his younger brother, the Duke of Cumberland. George III actually read the Decline and Fall.

He was also keenly interested in science. He built the King’s Observatory in Richmond-upon-Thames so that he could observe the transit of Venus in 1769. He also funded the construction of the world’s largest telescope for the use of William Herschel, who had discovered the planet Uranus in 1781. His vast collection of scientific and mathematical instruments is now on view in the Science Museum in London.

Although given to self-righteousness, George III was never petty. He fought hard to retain the American colonies, but when their independence was established, he received the first minister from the United States, John Adams, with complete courtesy. While being painted by the American-born artist Benjamin West, he asked West...
what General Washington intended to do with the arrival of peace. West said that Washington planned to retire to Mt. Vernon. “If he does that,” said the astonished king, “he will be the greatest man in the world.” In 1805, he bought a copy of Chief Justice John Marshall’s five volume biography of Washington.

And what of his madness? The “King’s Malady” has puzzled historians ever since the king’s reign. For one thing, it was intermittent. Episodes occurred in 1764–65 (a mild case, previously unnoticed by historians), 1788–89, 1801, 1804, and 1810–20. The final bout ended only with the king’s death, after an achingly sad last decade, for it was accompanied by both blindness and then deafness. Roberts notes that even though he could no longer hear the music, the king continued to play the harpsichord (which had once belonged to Handel).

The Prince of Wales, later George IV, had to be appointed regent to act in the king’s name. Roberts makes clear his utter contempt for George IV, who possessed none of his father’s many virtues and had innumerable vices that the king despised.

From the mid-1960s, the King’s Malady has often been ascribed to porphyria, a blood disease. Roberts demolishes that theory in an appendix, pointing out, for instance, that none of the king’s innumerable descendants have suffered from that genetic disease. He believes, and he makes a strong case, that the king suffered from what is today called a bipolar disorder, acute manic psychosis. The king often had to be kept in a strait-jacket to prevent injury to himself and others. He would sometimes talk incessantly, once for 24 hours straight, until his voice gave out.

In the late 18th century, of course, knowledge of mental illness was practically nonexistent, and the king was subjected to treatments that were not only worthless but often painful and debilitating as well. Perhaps the saddest aspect of the King’s Malady was that when the Malady struck, the king, unlike schizophrenics, was fully aware that he was going mad but was powerless to prevent it.

In this detailed but wonderfully readable biography, Andrew Roberts gives us the life of one of Britain’s most successful kings. To be sure, he lost America, but the British Empire greatly expanded during his reign, despite the loss of the American colonies. And the British economy, thanks to the Industrial Revolution, was far larger and richer. In no small part thanks to this decent, hardworking, dedicated sovereign, his reign laid the groundwork for what we might call the “British Century.”

The Once and Former King

On Clark Gable

By Terry Teachout

In the 1930s, Clark Gable was the most popular male movie star in America, a titan of the screen whose nickname, “the King of Hollywood,” was in no way exaggerated. Today, he is Rhett Butler. Unlike Humphrey Bogart, Cary Grant, or James Stewart, whose well-defined personalities did not prevent them from playing a wide variety of characters, Gable was a one-character actor. Though two of his other films Frank Capra’s It Happened One Night (1934) and Frank Lloyd’s Mutiny on the Bounty (1935) are well remembered, it is Gone With the Wind, the 1939 screen version of Margaret Mitchell’s blockbuster novel about life in the Old South, for which he is mainly known today.

One reason why his performance in Gone With the Wind stands out, however, is that the part of Rhett Butler is more dramatically challenging than those he played in the bespoke vehicles to which MGM, his home studio, assigned him for most of his acting career. As one of his screenwriters was told, the “Gable character” was “tough, uneducated, got a hell of a temper, can figh his weight in wildcats... with sex that drives the women crazy.” He was also charming and funny, for Gable was a consummate straight man whose reactions to the comic lines and business his female co-stars bounced off him, most famously Claudette Colbert in It Happened One Night, enhanced their effectiveness immeasurably.

In all these things, Gable had much in common with John Wayne, a star of the same generation who, like Gable, played a stylized version of himself in his films But Gable has nothing remotely approaching Wayne’s posthumous stature,

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though several of the more lurid rumors about him that circulated during his lifetime, some true and others not, did make it into *Hail, Caesar!* (2016), a satirical comedy about studio-system Hollywood by Joel and Ethan Coen.*

Is John Wayne’s continued renown a mere function of the fact that he lived nearly 20 years longer than Gable and did some of his best work in his final films? Or was there something else about Gable that specifically militated against his retaining the posthumous celebrity of Wayne and his other great contemporaries? The answer is to be found not in his acting or personality, but in the shape of his long career—and in his patriotic decision to interrupt that career at midpoint to serve in World War II, something that Wayne conspicuously avoided.

Born in 1901 in a small Ohio town, Gable was the only son of an oil-well driller. Stagestruck as soon as he saw a touring theater group at the age of 17, he resolved at once to become an actor but had no immediately apparent natural talent. Nevertheless, he took private lessons from a much older woman whom he married in 1924. They moved to Hollywood that year, but Gable was unable to land any major roles. Instead, he made his way to New York, where he worked on Broadway, then returned to Hollywood in 1930 and began appearing in supporting roles at Warner Bros. He then signed an exclusive long-term contract with MGM, whose executives had concluded that he had the potential to become a star.

To this end, MGM teamed him with Joan Crawford in a series of eight films. They had powerful chemistry both on and off screen, and Crawford later said that to be in his presence gave her “twinges of a sexual allure beyond belief.” Their collaborations moved Gable out of the supporting-actor category, and he clinched his top billing with Victor Fleming’s *Red Dust* (1932), a sexually frank pre-Code drama in which he played the manager of a rubber plantation in Vietnam who becomes simultaneously involved with a prostitute from Saigon (Jean Harlow) and a married woman (Mary Astor).

It was in *Red Dust* that Gable’s comic talents first became evident. In the words of John Lee Mahin, the film’s screenwriter,

> I’d give the girl the cracks because Gable was funniest when he reacted. And he’d say, “Geez, John, these lines are not particularly funny.” I’d tell him, “But your expression when we cut to you—that’s the funny thing. The audience doesn’t really start to laugh—doesn’t get it—until that big kisser of yours comes on and you’re terribly uncomfortable or sore.”

But MGM did not know how to use this side of Gable and spent the next two years casting him in such implausible projects as a screen adaptation of Eugene O’Neill’s el-ephantine *Strange Interlude*. It was then that studio executives loaned him out to Columbia for *It Happened One Night*, a delicious romantic comedy that gave him unlimited opportunities to react to Claudette Colbert in scene after scene. (She plays a willful heiress fleeing from her father; he plays a reporter who has guessed her identity and becomes her traveling companion in order to land the story for his paper.) The result was a colossal hit that brought Gable his only best-actor Oscar and made him the biggest of movie stars.

According to Frank Capra,
the Gable of It Happened One Night was “the real Gable. He was never able to play that kind of character except in that one film. They had him playing these big, huff-and-puff he-man lovers, but he was not that kind of guy. He was a down-to-earth guy, he loved everything, he got down with the common people.”

True or not, MGM stuck to the he-man-lover Gable formula, varying it only on occasion, most effectively in Mutiny on the Bounty, in which he played opposite Charles Laughton, the most celebrated character actor of the 1930s. In addition to having a pronounced dislike of homosexuals like Laughton, Gable was nervous about sharing a screen with so formidable an artist and he refused to assume an English accent. But to everyone’s surprise, he and Laughton ended up liking each other and worked well together, and Gable gave a strong performance as Fletcher Christian, the mutineer who rebels against Captain Bligh’s tyrannous behavior.

Four years later, Gable proved himself in a different way in Gone With the Wind. Once again, he was unsure of himself, refusing to play Rhett Butler with a Southern accent and concerned about working with George Cukor, an openly gay director who had a reputation for being especially good with women stars like Katharine Hepburn and whom Gable feared would favor Vivien Leigh, who played Scarlett O’Hara. While there is no evidence that Gable lost his temper on the set and shouted, “I won’t be directed by a fairy,” it is known that he complained privately about Cukor, who was replaced by Victor Fleming.

Whatever did or did not happen, Gable gave the performance of a lifetime in Gone With the Wind. He is the complete embodiment of Rhett Butler, a wealthy rake who is by turns sardonic, disillusioned, and unflappable—but also grimly amused by the unshakable naiveté of the young Southern men whom he knows will be chewed up by the Civil War. He is also, as always, unambiguously masculine, and it is hard to see how Scarlett, as immature as she is in the film’s first half, could ever have preferred Leslie Howard’s near-effete Ashley Wilkes to a man like Rhett. But he never overplays his hand, and the barbed sarcasm of his line readings also tells us that Rhett is a man of intelligence (as was Gable, though he was in private life a shy man who preferred to keep his thoughts to himself).
Most striking of all is the manner in which Gable throws away his oft-quoted exit line, “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.” It is easy to forget the perfection of this line reading because Leigh, like Laughton in Mutiny on the Bounty, is simultaneously going to histrionic extremes. Instead of trying to rival her, Gable steps back, figuratively speaking, and makes it clear through understatement that she has exhausted his willingness to forgive.

Hawks's Red River (1948) that “I’m going to kill you,” real acting.

Gable’s 1939 marriage to the actress Carole Lombard had been a profoundly happy love match, but it ended in violent, life-changing tragedy. Lombard was an ardent supporter of FDR and urged Gable to enlist immediately after Pearl Harbor. MGM pressured him not to serve, but when Lombard was killed in a plane crash en route to a war-bond rally, the despondent Gable enlisted in the Army, which assigned him to a motion-picture unit. He flew in five hazardous combat missions over occupied Europe, aware at all times that if his plane went down and he was captured alive, he would be put on display by the Nazis.

When Gable returned to Hollywood after the war, his career entered a long, dismaying slide. The film he made, which included John Ford's Mogambo (1953), a watered-down remake of Red Dust, and George Seaton's Teacher's Pet, a vapid romantic comedy in which he played opposite Doris Day and Gig Young, were largely unworthy of his talents save for Robert Wise's Run Silent, Run Deep (1958), a taut war film about submariners in which he co-starred with Burt Lancaster.

In 1961, Gable shared the screen with Marilyn Monroe and Montgomery Clift in John Huston's The Misfit, a dark tale of the inability of an aging cowboy to fit into the modern world. Written by Arthur Miller, Monroe's then-husband, it was also a portrait of Monroe as a heedless innocent. The script is overly poetic in places, but it gave Gable the opportunity to give one of his most eloquent performances, to which the distress marks of late middle age (he was 59) add depth. Two days after the film wrapped, he had a heart attack, the result of a lifetime of heavy smoking, and died 10 days after that.

The Misfit failed at the box office and Gable's reputation, already sullied by the string of unworthy films he had made, quickly went into eclipse. A year later, John Wayne starred in John Ford's The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, one of his fine films and he continued to appear on screen to similarly imposing effect until 1976, three years before his own death from lung cancer. From that day to this, he has remained, unlike Gable, one of the best-known screen stars of the studio-system era.

Will Gable's reputation ever undergo a renascence? Alas—and unlike Wayne—he did not make enough first-rate film to justify that kind of large-scale revival. But Red Dust, It Happened One Night, Mutiny on the Bounty, Gone With the Wind, Run Silent, Run Deep, and The Misfit will ensure between them that he will never be entirely forgotten, and many of his lesser films also have the power to give honest pleasure. Of how many studio-system stars can as much be said a half-century after their deaths?

Gable with Monroe in The Misfits

“His acting was limited, but true; his powers of transformation negligible,” Simon Callow wrote of Gable in his biography of Charles Laughton. “Good looks and inimitable sexual charm were his strong suits.” What Callow neglects to add is that it is also the definition of a certain kind of larger-than-life Hollywood star, that Gable was that kind of star par excellence, and that his performance in Gone With the Wind transcends it. Whatever his larger limitations, this unforgettable scene is, like John Wayne's quiet but terrifying warning to Montgomery Clift in Howard Hawks's Red River (1948) that "I'm going to kill you," real acting.

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 56 may be familiar with.

The Chinese friends all live in an iPartmént—which is about as nice and unaffordable in real life as the iPartmént the American Friends lived in—and they share a lot of the same character traits as the American iPartmént Friends. There’s an uptight one and a ditzy one and one who has somehow translated the sarcastic delivery of Chandler into Mandarin. Plus a bunch of nerd Big Bang Theory touches and a dollop of How I Met Your Mother, because when you’re stealing, you may as well go for it.

It’s a different world, though, because Chinese television viewers have also seen those American shows, on the Web or satellite or just the way that young people manage to see everything somehow. So they’re hip to the copycat ways of iPartmént. And they’re complaining.

“Many lines and scenes have been completely ripped off from American shows,” an anonymous viewer told the state-run Global Times newspaper. “I thought it was shameful to do this. It is an insult to the American TV producers and an insult to the screenwriters and producers of original Chinese TV shows.”

Well, yeah. I mean, yes, of course. Intellectual property theft is bad. Although I have yet to meet an American television writer who hasn’t, at some point, thought to himself, I wonder if we can reuse an old episode of The Dick Van Dyke Show? The mistake that the Chinese executives made when they cut and pasted their way to a television show was that they were out of step with their connected online audience who, if they had wanted to watch Friends, would have just watched Friends. They didn’t need a locally inflected Hitburger! version.

The mistake is understandable, because as long as there has been an international television business, the rule has been that shows need to be adjusted and translated for the local audience. In America, you’re movin’ on up. In Turkey, it has to be sunf atxyoruz.

If a salesman convinced Turkish television executives to buy the format for The Jeffersons, he could still turn around and sell the same format to Armenia, Russia, Italy, wherever. The complicated, Balkanized global television marketplace was a bonanza for American studios who could carve up licensing territories into ever-smaller slices and live out the dream of every capitalist who ever lived by selling the same product over and over again. These “format sales” were among the most lucrative sources of ancillary profits and they had the additional benefit of keeping old-and-in-the-way sitcom writers off the streets.

It’s hard to imagine that world returning. American audiences are generally considered to be the most parochial and least tolerant of “foreign” media. And yet one of the most popular shows available in the United States is Squid Game, a dark and gripping show from South Korea. Netflix reports that it has been viewed in 142 million households. Lupin, a French heist drama based on a classic series of novels and movies about gentleman jewel thief Arsène Lupin, was watched by 78 million Netflix subscribers in its first 28 days of release, becoming a Top 10 show on American television for weeks and weeks.

Five years ago, an American network might have been convinced to buy the format to Squid Game but would have quickly tailored it to what it imagined the American audience would accept. Something not so weird, or pink, or dark. Something with a happy ending, normal food, and set in Florida. They would, in other words, turn it into a Hitburger!

It’s equally hard to imagine an international broadcast network today buying the format of an American sitcom—much less importing salt-and-pepper talent to manage the production process of a homegrown version. Everything is already available in the (mostly) borderless streaming universe. The customer prefers the original version.

The result is that global television is no longer the idiosyncratic, highly local freak show it once was, with David Letterman imitators braying in German and Russian Raymonds complaining about their babushkas next door.

The big streaming services resemble large international fast-fashion retailers. Just as Zara and H&M have brought popular and appealing fashions to a global customer, where everyone gets to wear everything and there’s no such thing as “Ukrainian blue jeans,” Netflix and Hulu have done the same for entertainment. For the studio salesmen and Los Angeles-based comedy writers, this new universe is a calamity.

But for viewers across the globe, it’s sunf atxyoruz.
The iPartment and Its Discontents

ROB LONG

European and South American film producers and directors may spend most of their trip in their hotel rooms. They fl w in, check in, nap and shower, and prepare for a day’s worth of screenings. But as he was dressing, he turned on the TV and suddenly caught a few seconds of a German talk show. The host, doing an exact imitation of David Letterman—same vocal intonation, same staccato laugh, same singsongy repetition of key comic phrases, even the same gap between the two front teeth. My friend doesn’t speak a word of German, but he still couldn’t turn it off. It was the television version of one of those burger joints you used to see around Europe—not exactly McDonald’s, but you knew what they were going for with their funny, blenderized English names like Hitburger!

If you find yourself jet-lagged in Istanbul, you might land on a comedy show about a short, angry man who struts around his apartment bickering with his housekeeper. Depending on your demographic group, this show will look a lot like The Jeffersons. Except with doner kebab.

Sometimes these imitations are part of a business arrangement. The Rosenthal brothers, the ferociously talented creator and producer of the long-running Everybody Loves Raymond, made a terrific documentary, Exporting Raymond, about bringing his hit comedy to Russia. Netflix it. You won’t be disappointed.

This used to be a lucrative side gig for television writers. Twenty years ago, television executives from Europe and South America would fl into L.A. and scoop up older sitcom writers and import them to create and run—and in some cases simply explain—American-style television shows. And because they’re not really making the great, old fashioned multiple-camera comedies anymore in the United States, it was a pretty sweet third-act twist in the career of over-the-hill comedy scribes to spend some time overseas, lionized like sitcom Yodas.

“Tell me please,” a Greek writer asked a friend of mine who took a gig like this, “we would like to know how to do this wonderful thing, this Caroline in the City.” American sitcom veterans too old for American network television would live like pashas in foreign cities, training the local writers in such tradecraft as managing a writing staff, organizing and running a rewrite session, story structure, the “scene button,” the “act break,” and also more arcane but still important techniques such as the “expensive lunch order,” the “veiled network-executive insult,” and the very crucial “reusing old material.” That is why you can see a pretty letter-perfect bizarro version of The Jeffersons on Turkish television. And, I’m told, a Polish Two and a Half Men.

Other times, of course, things just pop up on foreign television that resemble American television shows without the nicety of money changing hands. In China, for instance, there was a show about a group of six young single people who live close together in the big city—in this case, Shanghai. It’s called, with that off-putting almost-English quality of a lot of Chinese things, iPartment. The show is a lot like an American sitcom about six young people hanging out in the big city you
YOU DESERVE TO KNOW THE TRUTH...

The Israel Apartheid Lie

Contrary to all facts, Israel’s enemies maliciously accuse the Jewish state of South African-style discrimination against Arabs. Why do they tell this obvious lie?

Despite Israel’s exemplary civil rights record and its laws protecting all ethnicities and religions, colleges still host Israel Apartheid Weeks and some critics insist Israel is or will become an apartheid state. The truth quickly exposes the malign motives of these accusations.

What are the facts?

Apartheid in South Africa was enforced by dozens of laws that restricted where citizens of color could live, work, congregate and go to school—even whom they could marry. None of these laws—nor any like them—exists or ever has existed in Israel. How could this bizarre “Israel Apartheid” calumny spread so pervasively in Western academies and mainstream media? The answer is The Big Lie—the Nazi propaganda principle, recognizing that when a falsehood is repeated often enough, it becomes accepted as truth. Even former President Jimmy Carter—no friend of Israel—titled his book, “Palestine: Peace or Apartheid.”

What was South African apartheid?

“Apartheid,” the Dutch-Afrikaans term for separation, was the social order of the former South Africa. It meant that the Black majority of the nation, as well as the so-called Colored, were kept strictly apart in all aspects of life. White domination over the native population was fundamental. For instance: Non-Whites had to carry a “passbook.” Passbook infringement could lead to deportation to one of the Bantu “homelands.” Blacks and Coloreds were kept from a wide array of jobs. Black-White sex was a serious, jail-time criminal offense. Hospitals and ambulances were strictly segregated. Whites enjoyed free education until graduation. Not so for Blacks, whose education was strictly limited by the oppressive “Bantu Education Act.”

By law, no mixed sports were allowed. Park benches, swimming pools, libraries, and movies were strictly separated. Blacks were not allowed to purchase or imbibe alcoholic drinks. This is only a small, partial list of the many abusive indignities that non-Whites suffered under the South African apartheid regime.

Israeli Equality.

Even to hint that Israel practices apartheid is outrageous and hateful, since the exact opposite is the case. Not a single apartheid practice applies to Israel. Israel is by far the most racially mixed and tolerant nation in the entire Middle East. Israeli Arabs, who are about 20% of Israel’s population, enjoy, without exception, the same rights and opportunities in all fields as their Jewish fellow citizens. The total equality of all Israelis is assured in Israel’s founding document. All non-Jews—which means primarily Muslim Arabs—have full voting rights. At present, 13 Arabs sit in Israel’s Knesset (parliament), one of Israel’s Supreme Court judges is Arab, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) has Arab generals. Arabs are represented in Israel’s diplomatic service all over the world. Homeownership is higher for Arabs than Jews. Arab students study in all Israeli universities. All children in Israel are entitled to subsidized education until graduation, with no restrictions based on ethnicity or religion. In short, Muslim Arabs and other non-Jews are allowed everything that Jews are allowed—everything that non-Whites were not allowed in apartheid South Africa. These facts should shame anyone who accuses Israel of apartheid.

But, yes, there is one difference: Jewish Israeli men and women are obligated to a multi-year stint in the IDF or community service; For Arab Israeli citizens, this service is voluntary.

Separation from Palestinian Arabs. Some critics accuse Israel of segregation because it prevents Arab Palestinians who live in Gaza or the disputed territories of Judea and Samaria (aka the West Bank) from freely entering Israel. This of course is absurd. Arab Palestinians are citizens of the Palestinian Authority, not of Israel, and some 95% have never set foot in Israel. While Israel allows 85,000 Palestinian workers into its territory daily, Israel controls its borders strictly, just as the U.S. does.

What’s more, Israel has many times offered to cede its territorial rights in the West Bank to the Arab Palestinians for a state, but they have refused all offers, instead continuing terrorist and missile attacks against Israeli civilians, including Israeli Arabs.

Time to stop the Big Lie about apartheid in Israel.

Too many people have been duped by the hateful language of Israel’s enemies. In fact, Israel is a beacon of freedom and enlightenment in the Middle East. It’s time for fair-minded people—and mainstream media—to broadcast the truth about Israel . . . and forcefully reject the apartheid label. Those who demonize Israel with this falsehood fully deserve the label of anti-Semitism.

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