Yes, There Is a Revolution

A YEAR AND A HALF AFTER A RADICAL LEFTIST VISION OF AMERICA TOOK HOLD OF THE HIGH GROUND OF OUR CULTURE, ITS SUCCESSES ARE MANY—but it is being challenged to great effect as well.

By Abe Greenwald

The Pandemic Public-Health Disaster

JAMES B. MEIGS
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# Commentary

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To the Editor:

JAMES K. GLASSMAN wrote an absolutely great article about the stock-market rise (“If You Bet on the American Economy, You Win,” December). The only point he missed, however, is that stock-market investment may be one of the biggest contributors to the wealth gap in this country.

Andrew Wels
Rye Brook, New York

James K. Glassman writes:

According to the Federal Reserve, the top half of households have $133 trillion in wealth while the bottom half has $3 trillion. I am not so much concerned about the gap as about the paucity of assets such as savings accounts, mutual funds, and real estate for so many Americans. Wealth gives families security and helps them buy into the economic system. Encouraging the acquisition of assets is a legitimate—and, I think, urgent—objective of public policy.

Mr. Wels is right. Over the past 30 years, the value of corporate equities and mutual-fund shares held by U.S. households has risen by $38 trillion, but the gains for the bottom half of Americans were only about $220 billion of that, or less than 1 percent. We need to make it easier for more middle- and lower-income people to build wealth through stock ownership.

How? One way is to provide a tax credit (not just deductibility) for contributions to IRAs and 401(k) plans. Another is to allow workers to devote a portion of their Social Security taxes to qualified stocks and funds. Another is to give every child at birth a $10,000 stock account, which would be locked away until age 18 or 21 and could be used for education or home purchases or rolled into a retirement account. That would cost the Treasury $40 billion a year, and it’s hard to think of a better use for taxpayer dollars.

Rye Brook, New York
Books, Glorious Books

To the Editor:

Reading Joseph Epstein’s article about libraries concentrated my thoughts on the matter, as I have recently sold the bulk of my own collection—about 15,000 books—to one of New York City’s iconic used bookstores (“Books Do Furnish a Civilization,” December). These constituted about two-thirds of my personal library, and in sorting through the approximately 22,000 books, I first felt as if I were betraying myself. These volumes and I were seemingly inseparable. Nevertheless, as I decided which books to keep, I concluded that this was an opportunity to remake myself as a teacher, scholar, and after-midnight reader. Reading books is a form of interior decoration in which the mansions of our minds are fitted out to our tastes and intellectual desires. But owning the books and displaying the ones we read goes a step further toward making public and private statements about who we are, or who we want to be known as.

I once read Max Weber’s brilliant defense of value-free teaching and scholarship, “Science as a Vocation,” and I took to heart his critique of the Americanization of the German universities. Weber lamented the imminent disappearance of scholars’ personal libraries, which he likened to craftsmen’s tools of the trade. As I got to know my graduate professors, I realized that they were men and women who had large collections pertinent to their scholarly interests. That epiphany set me off on a life...
long quest to read according to my interests, and to own my own library. Having pared it down to 7,000 books, I did so based on my present and future interests. These interests were often veiled when the collection was so much larger and unwieldy. I now feel the power of Bob Dylan’s line in “From My Back Pages”: “I was so much older then, I’m younger than that now.” Hooray for books and their rejuvenating place in my life.

Howard Schneiderman
Easton, Pennsylvania

To the Editor:

Joseph Epstein’s “Books Do Furnish a Civilization” is a thoughtful and entertaining piece from a wonderful writer. Regarding Epstein’s remark that Borges’s Library of Babel was the only book he knew set in a library, I would like to call attention to Vikram Paralkar’s imaginative novel The Afflictions, which takes place in a mysterious Central Library containing a remarkable Encyclopedia of Medicine.

Philip L. Cohen
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

To the Editor:

As a bibliophile with more than 20,000 books mainly in Hebrew, I enjoyed immensely Joseph Epstein’s essay on libraries. In my youth, I literally crawled around many libraries in the U.S., Canada, and especially Israel looking for treasures. As it turned out, and as indicated in this essay, these treasures reflected my personal tastes. Part of the fun was searching and matching.

Joshua Leiner
Lakewood, New Jersey

To the Editor:

James B. Meigs is not wrong to conclude that technology is only one prerequisite for fully automated vehicles and that even the technology for driverless cars in urban environments is not yet fully baked (“Tapping the Brakes on Self-Driving Cars,” December). If ordering a robotic taxi to Columbus Circle may not yet be on the horizon, however, it doesn’t mean that we won’t soon see fully autonomous vehicles operating in other capacities.

As Meigs points out, today’s systems can “almost entirely take over the task of driving in predictable environments such as major highways.” Trucks spend the vast majority of their operating hours on these highways. And given the labor shortages in the trucking industry and the related supply-chain problems that have recently come to light, the market desire for self-driving trucks is increasing. Many well-funded autonomous technology companies have focused on trucking and delivery, and with the stars lining up, don’t be surprised if 2022 is the year when automated trucks have their breakout moment.

Michael Granoff
Tel Aviv, Israel

To the Editor:

Meir Y. Soloveichik brilliantly points out the confluence of Hellenism and Nazism (“Hanukkah Unbound,” December). Man left to his own sense of right and wrong can produce a Sodom or a Third Reich. Without the Bible as our guide, the most developed of nations can concoct an efficient killing field like Auschwitz.

Sinai brought morality to the world, and it is the task of those who believe in the words of the Bible to reject the skewed paths laid out before them. Rabbi Soloveichik, in his contrasting the bright flame of the Olympic torch with the delicate light of the menorah, gives substance to the contrary idea that right makes might.

Fred Ehrman
New York City

Hellenism and Hanukkah
To the Editor:

I ALWAYS admire Terry Teachout’s critical insights, but I believe he underestimates the attraction of home viewing (“Do We Really Need Movie Theaters?” December). When television broadcasters first began offering Hollywood’s fare, sets were small, images were black-and-white, often ghosting or flickering, and the sounds they produced were flat and monaural. But that was yesterday’s technology. Now our TVs have gleaming flatscreens, often encompassing entire living-room walls. Their images are crystalline, as brilliant as any projected in the movie palaces of yore. Add to this the rich sounds emanating from theater-like, multi-speaker sound systems that many people have. Also consider what stay-at-home viewers avoid: neighbors texting irritatingly on flickering cellphones, munching or slurping noisily on snacks, or pushing their way in front of us because they’ve arrived late or feel nature’s urge. It’s not just COVID that’s keeping many of us out of the multiplex.

FREDERIC GOLDEN
Santa Barbara, California

To the Editor:

I ENJOYED Terry Teachout’s discussion of movie theaters. His analysis of the technical history of how we view films and of what the future holds was interesting. However, he addressed the question of the purpose of movie theaters almost entirely in terms of films themselves. Surely he knows that movies are often not the main reason people go to theaters. My first date with my wife was almost 50 years ago, when we saw The Towering Inferno, not a great movie by any measure but one of the grand experiences of my life. There is a tremendous amount of social interaction not involving film that takes place in movie theaters, and that is why they won’t go away.

THOMAS J. STRAKA
Pendleton, South Carolina
THE ATLANTIC IS one of the most prestigious magazines in the nation—and almost certainly its most lavishly funded. When Laurene Powell Jobs (whose net worth is approximately $22 billion) bought former owner David Bradley's stake in the magazine in 2017, she ushered in an era of almost unimaginable expansion for a publication created before the Civil War. Under its editor, Jeffrey Goldberg, the Atlantic has added 100 new staff jobs. The once-staid monthly is now a round-the-clock Web content provider that releases dozens of new items a day.

The Atlantic's prominence and seriousness—and the bottomless pockets of its multibillionaire owner—have made it a dream come true for literally hundreds of liberal American journalists who spent most of the past 20 years in a panic about the financial viability of their chosen profession. At the Atlantic, anyone can be anything, and everyone can be a celebrity—only under the Atlantic's leadership. With the Atlantic's high-end Trump-resistance model to its coverage of COVID—in which the virus came to serve as the fulfillment of the worst fears of the Trump hater, as though nature itself were punishing America for the results of the 2016 election.

As those numbers suggest, the pandemic's outbreak in 2020 brought the Atlantic's high-end Trump-resistance model to its coverage of COVID—in which the virus came to serve as the fulfillment of the worst fears of the Trump hater, as though nature itself were punishing America for the results of the 2016 election. The Atlantic launched the COVID Tracking Project to count the number of cases and deaths when they were not readily available, and published innumerable stories, articles, items, and memoirs on the subject. Ed Yong won a Pulitzer Prize for explanatory reporting for his COVID stories.

But with Trump out of the White House and pandemic fatigue becoming more fully entrenched among the public, subscription growth has slowed significantly. According to Byers, “even with last year's substantial surge, the magazine had lost more than $20...
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million and was on track to lose another $10 million [in 2021].” The magazine laid off 68 employees in the spring of 2020, though they were mostly in the public-events area—understandable, given that there were no public events to be staged in a country in lockdown. Twenty million is a drop in the bucket for Laurene Jobs, but nobody likes to lose that kind of money. Chris Hughes, the Facebook billionaire whose purchase of the New Republic was theoriginal model for the Laurene Jobs play, found that magazine’s annual losses a quarter of that size intolerable and sold it off after only a couple of years.

Those numbers might help explain why the overwhelming experience of reading the Atlantic in 2021 and the first weeks of 2022 is like being a therapist whose severely anxious patient flops on the couch and delivers a monologue about the tortures of his daily life. Or perhaps we should view the Atlantic community of editors, writers, and readers as a kind of daily group-therapy session. Consider that the “Most Popular” articles on the magazine’s website on a late-December day featured one potentially heartening story about COVID—“Omicron is the beginning of the end”—followed by several more that promised only horror: “How Long Does Omicron Take to Make you Sick?” “Is Omicron Milder?” A week earlier the magazine had warned, ominously, “America Is Not Ready for Omicron.”

And lest one think this tone infects only reporting on COVID, another popular recent piece promised to explain how “We're Heading Toward a Very American Climate Tragedy.” An earlier one highlighted the looming menace of... rocks: “The Terrifying Warning Lurking in the Earth’s Ancient Rock Record.” Even our cars are threatening: “Big Cars Are Killing Americans” was another headline of late. The print magazine strikes a similar tone: A 2021 cover story about foreign autocrats warned that “The Bad Guys Are Winning.”

Even positive reflections, like the lovely guest essay that basketball player and human-rights activist Enes Kanter wrote about becoming an American citizen and changing his surname to Freedom are usually overwhelmed by negativity. Kanter Freedom was abused on the Atlantic’s own website by its contributing editor Jemele Hill, who declared: “Enes Kanter Freedom is letting himself be used.” She was miffed that Kanter Freedom had the audacity to talk about his love of America on Tucker Carlson’s Fox News show and so naturally concluded that he is nothing but a right-wing pawn.

The Atlantic reader who visits the website rather than simply journeying there through social-media links is turned into a doom-scroller, confronted time and again as she journeys down the homepage with headlines like this one: “America Is Running Out of Time.” Note how the title lacks specificity; it doesn’t need specificity, because this is what nearly every article in the Atlantic is about. (A recent feature in the January/February print issue of the magazine was titled, simply, “Are We Doomed?”)

“Bring Back the Nervous Breakdown,” urged a 2021 article. And so Goldberg’s Atlantic has. An astonishingly large number of stories in both the print and online versions of the magazine now focus on the irrational feelings of a very particular and privileged class of people—elite, left-of-center, educated people who ironically believe themselves too sophisticated to be emotionally manipulated like the unwashed Fox-viewing masses they abhor.

Pieces like Ian Bogost’s essay “I’m Starting to Give Up on Post-Pandemic Life” typify the Atlantic’s panic porn—the titillating personal account of a distorted negative emotional experience described luridly with no observable larger social purpose. “Even if this strain is less bad than it might have been,” he writes of the Omicron variant, “only dumb luck will have made it so. That’s neither victory nor a sign that the emergency is over.” He then spirals into despair: “The coronavirus was once ‘novel’ because it was new. Now it feels both ancient and eternal. Having endured the emergence of two major strains even since the rollout of vaccines, a difficult thought is planted in my head: What if the pandemic never ends?”

This Eeyore-meets-Nietzsche tone now dominates much of the magazine’s coverage. Alexis Madrigal, the founder of its tracking project, offered a similar example of irrational meltdown in a piece about getting a breakthrough case of COVID at the end of 2021. After attending a wedding, Madrigal was consumed by the idea that he would get sick even though he initially tested negative. He described his response: “I did an intense Peloton workout and it felt fine, though maybe my legs were a little slow. I wasn’t eager to test again; a negative PCR test seemed good enough. But my wife heard me cough—one of only maybe 20 coughs throughout my whole sickness—and said, ‘Could you take another antigen test?’”

Reader, he got it. Whereupon he became a prisoner of his own irrationality, despite being vaccinated and experiencing only mild illness: “The life disruption—the logistical pain you cause those around you—is now a major part of any bad scenario. As I write this, I’m now 10 days past my first symptoms, but I continue to test positive on antigen tests, and so I have not returned home. I haven’t hugged my kids for 10 days.” (His kids never got sick.)
Madrigal’s conclusion isn’t that he might have overreacted in his risk assessment. He doesn’t even entertain that possibility. Rather, he doubles down on the idea of living in permanent emotional lockdown because of COVID: “Things aren’t likely to change that much for quite some time. Even after however many kids get vaccinated, there will still be breakthrough infections. Other variants could spread. Maybe we’re in this space for another year or two or three.”

In the Goldberg-Jobs Atlantic, even a straightforward business piece—in this case, about a wildly successful company that sells home exercise bikes—becomes an exercise in collective navel-gazing, as in the article titled “Peloton Is Stuck, Just Like the Rest of Us.” General-interest magazines like the Atlantic used to offer tips on how to improve one’s garden or publish colorful interviews or profiles with avid hobbyists. The Goldberg-Jobs version, by contrast, prefers to tell us “How Hobbies Have Infiltrated American Life,” as if the shoppers at Michael’s and Hobby Lobby were some kind of invading army wielding hot-glue guns. “Whether we realize it or not, even when we are alone, off the clock, doing whatever the hell we want, the Protestant work ethic and its pressure to be productive are still with us,” Julie Beck writes.

Pity the fools who actually enjoy pursuing hobbies during their free time; according to Beck, they have bought into a conspiracy about productive leisure. “The message that a hobby is the best way to spend one’s free time is also a message about what you should value most in life: hard work, achievement, productivity,” she writes. Beck stands firmly against such things because we ought to privilege “relationships, contemplation, and rest” as well as “enjoying creature comforts” and “replenishing your energy.” Unlike plebeian hobbies, you see, such things are “good for the soul.”

Herein lies another noticeable aspect of the magazine: its astounding and unaware snobbery. Whether it’s Zoom fatigue, the musings of upper-middle-class-women going through divorces, or the latest anti-racism approach, the Atlantic studiously avoids or downplays things that concern regular people. Take, for example, crime. A recent piece about “The Great Shoplifting Freakout” suggested that concerns over the brazen smash-and-grab crimes and flash-mob thefts around the country were merely a “moral panic.”

An article about “Rogue Prosecutors” was not, as one might assume in the wake of rising homicide rates, a tough-minded critique of the excesses of progressive prosecutors who undermine the rule of law by refusing to prosecute crime, but rather a complaint that prosecutors aren’t lenient enough and should be investigated by the federal government for failing to protect defendants’ rights.

But it is the Atlantic’s recent attempts to defend democracy that have produced some of the most alarmist headlines. Goldberg has explained it thus: “The Atlantic, across its long history, has held true to the belief that the American experiment is a worthy one, which is why we’re devoting so much of our journalism in the coming years to its possible demise.”

The democracy-is-doomed branding relies on a narrative that focuses on a president who is no longer in office (Trump) while studiously ignoring the one who, along with his party, now controls the federal government and runs the country. Christopher Scalia pointed out on Twitter that the print magazine has published only two articles about the Biden administration since his inauguration, one of which was an unconvincing bit of sycophancy and the other an argument for why Biden should investigate Trump.

Instead, the magazine remains focused on the menace of Trump rather than the conduct of the actual occupant of the Oval Office and the behavior of the thousands of officials he has installed in the executive branch. A recent cover story, “Trump’s Next Coup Has Already Begun,” began with the following worst-case-scenario:

Technically, the next attempt to overthrow a national election may not qualify as a coup. It will rely on subversion more than violence, although each will have its place. If the plot succeeds, the ballots cast by American voters will not decide the presidency in 2024. Thousands of votes will be thrown away, or millions, to
produce the required effect. The winner will be declared the loser. The loser will be certiﬁe
c President-elect. The prospect of this demo-
cratic collapse is not remote. People with the
motive to make it happen are manufacturing
the means. Given the opportunity, they will
act. They are acting already.

The article makes no attempt to leaven such fatal-
isim with alternative views; instead, it relies on “ex-
erts” who trafﬁc in hyperbole, like an academic who
says, “We face a serious risk that American democracy
as we know it will come to an end in 2024.”

Similarly, staff writer George Packer’s doom-mon-
gering reﬂections a year after January 6 predict disas-
ter ahead for democracy because everyone outside of
the Atlantic’s readership has poor discernment skills:
“Nothing has aided Donald Trump more than Ameri-
cans’ failure of imagination. It’s essential to picture an
unprecedented future so that what may seem impos-
sible doesn’t become inevitable.”

In Packer’s writing, and in the world of post-Trump
Atlantic readers more broadly, Democrats are always
well-meaning citizens pursuing proper policy goals,
while Republicans register as “decent” only if they
agree with Democratic proposals. “Decent Republi-
cans will have to work and vote for Democrats, and
Democrats will have to work and vote for anti-Trump
Republicans or independents in races where no
Democrat has a chance to win,” Packer claims. And
conveniently, norms can and should be trampled in the
name of “defending” democracy, so long as the decent
people are the ones doing the trampling: “Congressio-
nal Democrats and the Biden administration will have
to make the Freedom to Vote Act their top priority,
altering or ending the ﬁlibu ter to give this democratic
ﬁre wall a chance to become law.”

Not all Atlantic writers are of this type. Caitlin Flan-
nagan’s recent essays on living for decades with cancer
are phenomenal, and Conor Friedersdorf’s conserva-
tivistish-contrarian takes are always a welcome respite
from the doomsaying. But the general tone of the At-
lantic suggests something about the mindset of the
segment of elite America it represents and caters to:
The Atlantic reader is more driven by alarmism and
panic than the Fox News–viewing folks on the other
side of the partisan divide whom they criticize. The
Higher Perspective of the Atlantic is an elite spec-
ies of panic—it has no interest in the concerns of
someone who is worried about how to put food on
the table after getting laid off from her restaurant
job. Rather, it feels deeply the emotional burden of
those coming to the realization that “Office Holiday
Parties Really Might Never Be the Same.” This is the
class of people who, amid an ongoing pandemic,
identiﬁed with an unmasked and glamorous Alex-
andria Ocasio-Cortez in a “Tax the Rich” gown at
the Met gala, not with the masked minimum-wage
underlings standing silently nearby who served her
and her fellow partygoers.

Perhaps this combination of therapeutic elite
self-indulgence and doomsaying will keep the mag-
azine chugging along, providing sufﬁcient status and
emotional satisfaction to Laurene Jobs that she will
continue to provide the market-defying subventions to
keep Atlantic staffers comfortably housed in Brown-
stone Brooklyn forever. But it’s a long way from the
moral leadership the magazine boasts is part of the
institution’s DNA. Citing their commitment to end-
ing slavery, the Atlantic notes on its website, “When
the founders of the Atlantic gathered in Boston in the
spring of 1857, they wanted to create a magazine that
would be indispensable for the kind of reader who
was deeply engaged with the most consequential is-
ues of the day.” Judging by its output today, the most
consequential thing for the Atlantic is something far
less profound: validating the often astonishingly petty
anxieties of the 2020s urban elite.
PRESIDENT BIDEN was warned. Back in February 2021, as Congress debated the $2 trillion American Rescue Plan, former Treasury secretary Lawrence Summers made the case in a Washington Post op-ed that the bill might “set off inflationary pressures of a kind we have not seen in a generation, with consequences for the value of the dollar and financial stability.”

His argument was textbook economics: The proposed legislation simply spent too much relative to the size of the economy. It would come on top of an unprecedented $4 trillion in deficit spending Congress had appropriated the year before. The Federal Reserve, meanwhile, was doubling its balance sheet. And the economy in 2021 was growing. “There is the risk of inflation expectations rising sharply,” Summers concluded.

It was a risk Biden was willing to take. Neither the president nor his administration paid attention to their fellow Democrat. Biden kept saying that a smaller coronavirus-relief package wouldn’t be enough to help the economy recover from the pandemic. Longtime Biden adviser Jared Bernstein, who sits on the Council of Economic Advisers, called out Summers by name. “I think he’s wrong,” Bernstein told CNN. “I think he is wrong in a pretty profound way.” Biden signed the rescue plan into law on March 12.

By July, it was becoming clear that Bernstein, not Summers, was wrong “in a pretty profound way.” The Labor Department reported that prices rose 5.4 percent in June 2021, the largest increase since 2008. The inflation ate into wage gains and left Americans with a declining standard of living. Rather than admit error, the Biden administration and its supporters launched into a series of rhetorical dodges, pirouettes, non sequiturs, and dangerous cartwheels in order to duck responsibility for the consequences of their own policies. The performance was spirited and creative. But it was also more than a little batty and pathetic—a routine of stupid inflation tricks.

The first stunt was to assert that inflation was transitory. On July 19, 2021, Biden said, “Our experts believe and the data shows that most of the price increases we’ve seen are—were expected and expected to be temporary.” Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and White House press secretary Jen Psaki echoed his comments. In August, Federal Reserve chair Jerome Powell told a group of central bankers, “Current high inflation readings are likely to prove transitory.”

True, there was reason to suspect—or to hope—that inflation wouldn’t last. The pandemic warped the global economy. Disrupted supply chains cause shortages. Fewer workers made labor more expensive. Companies passed these costs on to consumers, who were eager to spend the savings and stimulus checks they had accumulated during the lockdowns. When too much demand chases too little supply, prices rise. It was understandable to assume that once the Biden
administration got the pandemic under control, infl- tion would come under control, too.

Except the Biden administration didn’t get the pandemic under control. The pandemic endured. But Biden’s people insisted that infl- tion was transitory. And they didn’t really understand what all the fuss was about. They treated infl- tion as a fir-t-world problem. Asked about supply-chain troubles on October 19, a condescending Psaki replied sarcastically, “The tragedy of the treadmill delayed.” On November 14, NBC’s Stephanie Ruhle downplayed the continued increase in prices, saying, “We need to put all of this in perspective.” She wasn’t talking about the perspective of the consumer whose grocery bill had jumped up. On November 17, MSNBC’s Joy Reid suggested that the infl- tion debate was nothing more than partisan politics: “Republicans,” she said, “jump on the infl- tion buzzword bandwagon.” On Reid’s bandwagon that day was Sarah “#CancelWhitePeople” Jeong of the New York Times, who tweeted, “All the stuff you see about infl- tion in the news is driven by rich people flippin’ their s—t.”

The data that came out in December, however, was enough to make the administration flip its script. On December 10, the Labor Department reported that prices had risen at a faster rate in November 2021 than they had in the previous 39 years. Suddenly, infl- tion wasn’t transitory anymore. “I am ready to retire the word ‘transitory,’” said Yellen. Powell changed his mind, too, announcing that the Fed would end its pandemic-era bond-buying program and increase interest rates three times in 2022. Psaki threw up her hands, telling a reporter who asked whether she still believed infl- tion was temporary, “It doesn’t really matter what you call it.”

The administration and its allies in Congress needed scapegoats. Their next trick was to blame price increases not on the $6 trillion in deficit spending that they (and the Trump administration) had appropriated over the past two years, or on the Fed’s ultra-loose monetary policy, but on greedy businessmen and corporate monopolies. On November 17, Biden told Federal Trade Commission chairwoman Lina Khan to investigate corporate price-fixin’. “I do not accept hardworking Americans paying more for gas because of anticompetitive or otherwise potentially illegal conduct,” Biden wrote. Would he accept hardworking Americans paying more for gas because of competitive conduct?

On Thanksgiving Eve, Elizabeth Warren went after—this is not a joke—“big poultry” for “paying billions in dividends, giving CEOs raises & earning huge profits” while “Americans are paying record high prices for their Thanksgiving turkey.” Then, on November 30, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s office issued a press release that read: “The jig is up—corporate earnings calls are revealing the hidden culprit behind the rising prices facing Americans: big corporations are raking in more cash than ever—squeezing working families and jacking up infl- tion with their price gouging and profiteerin.”

Emphasis on the word “hidden.” Pelosi’s office never established that price-gouging was behind corporate profits. Instead, the speaker’s press flacks made the classic error of mistaking correlation for causation. Not that you can blame them. Economics has never been Pelosi’s subject.

But it is the specialty of White House National Economic Council director Brian Deese. Which made it rather baffling when Deese told the New York Times in late December that antitrust enforcement “will deliver lower prices for Americans right away.” Well, it hasn’t. And it can’t. As Larry Summers observed, if monopolies were behind the infl- tion, one would expect corporate consolidation to accompany the rise in prices. Problem: “There is no basis whatsoever,” Summers wrote, “in thinking that monopoly power has increased during the past year in which infl- tion has greatly accelerated.”

There is a basis, however, to worry about the direction the administration might take if infl- tion persists into the 2024 campaign cycle. Biden has neither the desire nor the will to cut spending. The window for tax increases is closing fast. Powell might not be able to tighten the money supply without causing a recession. And the Democrats might plunge deeper into economic irrationality.

On December 29, for example, the Guardian published an op-ed by Isabella Weber, an assistant professor of economics at UMass-Amherst and the author of How China Escaped Shock Therapy. The headline: “We have a powerful weapon to fight infl- tion: price controls. It’s time we consider it.” None other than New York Times columnist Paul Krugman, not exactly known for his libertarianism, called Weber’s advice “truly stupid.” Which it is. Not to mention ineffective (price controls don’t work) and perverse (price controls cause shortages).

Was Krugman’s diss a sign that Democrats have learned something from the stagfl- tion of the 1970s? Afraid not. After economists to Krugman’s left attacked him on Twitter for being mean—this is like attacking the sky for being blue—the Nobel Prize-winning economist deleted the Tweet, “with extreme apologies,” where he had criticized Weber. The progressive rehabilitation of price controls gained momentum. And the stupid infl- tion tricks went on.
“TIS THE SEASON to remember Christopher Hitchens.” So my fellow Commentary columnist Matthew Continetti wrote in December in a Washington Free Beacon essay marking the 10th anniversary of the controversial writer’s untimely death. Continetti’s tribute to Hitchens is one of many over the years by authors I admire, and that is why I feel compelled—if ’tis truly the season—to explain why I consider Hitchens’s legacy to be so unworthy of celebration. In his writings about faith, and especially in his critiques of Judaism and the State of Israel, Hitchens reflected, with disconcerting constancy, the very vices that he purported to criticize throughout his career: bigotry, dishonesty, and ignorance.

The bestselling book of Hitchens’s career, and the one for which he is most known, is *God Is Not Great: Why Religion Poisons Everything*. It is easy to document historical horrors committed in the name of religion. What sets this book apart—as Benjamin Kerstein documented in Jewish Ideas Daily—is the casual statements about Judaism that are obviously untrue, as well as its obsession with Judaism. Hitchens not only criticizes biblical commandments that stand in tension with the zeitgeist; he attacks what he calls the “pitiless teachings of the God of Moses, who never mentions human solidarity and compassion at all.” This is a strange thing to say about a Pentateuch that begins by banning murder because all humanity is created in the image of God, and concludes in Deuteronomy with the exhortation to “love the stranger” and to not abhor the Edomite, “for he is your brother.”

Similarly, Hitchens mourns the events marked by Hanukkah, because if Antiochus Epiphanes’s assaults on Judaism had succeeded, Judaism would have been eradicated. Antiochus, he insisted, “weaned many people away from the sacrifices, the circumcisions, the belief in a special relationship with God, and the other reactionary manifestations of an ancient and cruel faith.” Leaving aside the manifold murders of Antiochus’s regime documented in classical texts, it is strange to say that the pagan Antiochus weaned his subjects off sacrifices; one need only visit, or Google, ancient Athens to find the “Temple of Olympian Zeus” commissioned by Antiochus. Its existence illustrated just how important the act of sacrifice was to the Seleucid emperor. “What can be asserted without evidence,” Hitchens famously asserted, “can also be dismissed without evidence.” But what are we to make about statements that are contrary to all obvious

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evidence—evidence that even rudimentary research would reveal? Are Hitchens's assertions against obvious evidence not evidence itself that his assaults are expressions of deliberate dishonesty?

Some admirers of Hitch on the right concede how troubling this is. Former Reagan speechwriter Peter Robinson said he had always known that, on religion, “Hitch could be unfair—willfully so—and quite capable of presenting as fresh and new arguments that had grown stale a century ago.” Robinson added, “What I hadn’t quite realized, though, was that Hitch was also deeply ignorant—in particular, that in discussing the scriptures Hitch simply had no idea what he was talking about.” Robinson's admiration for Hitchens, as he wrote in 2011, stems from the fact that Hitchens “held his head up for a flag of all the free.” Similarly, Continetti concludes that the lesson of Hitchens's life is that “freedom needs champions.” Indeed it does, but Hitchens's comments about faith illustrate that he learned the wrong lessons from a 20th century marked by battles between liberty and tyranny.

His penchant for intentionally eliding evidence was reflected in his description of faith as “the origin of all dictatorship.” These were words written by a man who had witnessed a century marked by militantly atheist Communist dictatorships that murdered more members of humanity than any faith community in history. His brother, Peter, has powerfully pointed out that Hitchens's religion writings were recycled talking points of the very regimes he claimed to oppose:

I am also baffled and frustrated by the strange insistence of my anti-theist brother that the cruelty of Communist anti-theist regimes does not reflect badly on his case and on his cause. It unquestionably does. Soviet Communism is organically linked to atheism, materialist rationalism and most of the other causes the new atheists support. It used the same language, treasured the same hopes and appealed to the same constituency as atheism does today.

Meanwhile, as his life came to a close, Hitchens's criticisms of Israel grew more and more vile. In 2010, he published an infamous article in Slate titled “Israel's Shabbos Goy,” wherein he asserted that America's support for Israel embodied the “old concept of the shabbos goy—the non-Jew who is paid a trifling fee to turn out the lights or turn on the stove, or whatever else is needful to get around the more annoying regulations of the Sabbath.” As Kerstein notes, this sentence combines all sorts of anti-Semitic talking points in a single go. It is, if you a will, a demagogic literary triple lutz. It fuses a classical trope according to which Jews are pharisaic charlatans with the more modern stereotype of Jews as dishonest, and tops it all off with the contemporary progressive assault on the Jewish state.

This execrable essay points to an interesting aspect of Hitchens's legacy and life. Why would a man who inveighed with such passion about the War on Terror continue to write in such a putrid way about the very country that was on that war's front lines? I am not certain of the answer, but I do have a guess. What drove Hitchens above all was his hatred of faith; he began God Is Not Great by explaining, “I have been writing this book my whole life.” Perhaps the one fact that Hitchens was never able to explain, the best piece of evidence for the existence of God that would not go away, was Israel itself.

Thousands of years ago, Jewish scripture claimed that Abraham's family would affect the world far beyond its numbers, that there was one land linked to its destiny, that this tiny people would experience exile, that it would survive all efforts to destroy it and would one day return from around the world. Then the most unexpected event of all occurred: It all came true. How does Hitchens explain that? What can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed; but the evidence was there, right in front of his face. If Israel, despite its mistakes and flaws, truly was the beacon of freedom in the very War on Terror he was now supporting, then his insipid atheism was under threat. And so Israel had to be assaulted, with all Hitchens's eloquence, even if it required the mustering of anti-Semitic tropes whose history he understood all too well.

In reading the many tributes that were written 10 years ago and today, it is obvious that Hitchens was a loyal friend, filled with joie de vivre, and a man of many talents. Watching his last interviews, it is painful to see someone who so clearly relished life battling against the dying of the light. But in my pastoral experience, I have seen many die too young, men and women who filled their lives with love and friendship without devoting so much of their time on earth to hateful and irresponsible invective. So 10 years later, I will not celebrate a man who attacked all I hold dear in so shallow, callous, and deceitful a manner. And because I am unwilling to dismiss the evidence that anti-religious dictatorship has provided us, I believe that freedom in the West is made more secure when Hitchens's writings about religion are exposed for the scurrilous, ignorant assertions that they are. >
Yes, There Is a Counter-Revolution

IT IS a noteworthy fact that human beings can sense acceleration but not constant speed. Think of your experience on an airplane. During takeoff, you might grip your armrest as you feel your body pressed to the seat. But once the plane is tearing across the sky at a steady 500 mph, it’s as if everything is perfectly still. And yet, you’re moving faster than at any other point in your life.

It’s a paradox worth keeping in mind as we check in on the current condition of the anti-American revolution that took off in the summer of 2020. In late May of that year, millions of Americans came out to protest the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. Isolated and dispirited by the COVID pandemic and successive lockdowns, citizens found a new sense of purpose and unity in social-justice activism. Pushed by radicals in Black Lives Matter and Antifa, and by other assorted leftists, the movement soon grew into a mass revolution to remake an irredeemably racist United States of America into a grievance paradise. The police were to be defunded, rent was to be cancelled, statues were to be toppled, and “whiteness” was to be remedied.

The revolution’s early methods were violence and intimidation. Riots consumed major American cities, with frequently deadly consequences. Armed anarchists took over swaths of land in Seattle and Portland. Both public figures and nobodies were forced to endure Maoist-like struggle sessions and confess their anti-revolutionary thoughts before being driven from polite society. The country’s elites, scared of losing their status overnight, embraced it all. A slew of re-education policies, governmental and corporate, was proposed to fight back the scourge of white privilege. The media applauded both the rioters and their aims. Liberal politicians adopted revolutionary language and imagery. Congressional Democrats donning Ghanaian kente

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Yes, There Is a Counter-Revolution : February 2022
A YEAR AND A HALF  
AFTER A RADICAL LEFTIST VISION   
OF AMERICA TOOK HOLD OF   
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CULTURE, ITS SUCCESSES ARE MANY  
— BUT IT IS BEING CHALLENGED   
TO GREAT EFFECT AS WELL

By Abe Greenwald

cloths—let us never forget this moment—took to their knees in Emancipation Hall and observed a moment of silence to honor the memory of George Floyd.

And the entire upheaval was born in a lie—a sinister and easily debunked lie about the police’s general treatment of black Americans. Derek Chauvin did indeed murder George Floyd (and was convicted and sentenced appropriately). But there is simply no campaign of black genocide in American law enforcement. In 2020, that year of cataclysm and chaos, police officers shot and killed 17 unarmed black men nationwide. There are more than 40 million black people in the United States.

Those not directly involved in the revolution, many of whom were locked down in their homes with few distractions, found themselves the subjects of a kind of media mass hypnosis. A round-the-clock campaign detailing the historical and present-day evils of the United States took its toll, and public opinion swung in favor of the radical project.

It was at that point, in the late summer of 2020, that I wrote an essay entitled “Yes, This Is a Revolution.” My hope for the piece, published in the September 2020 issue of Commentary, was to help Americans recognize the far-ranging and ruinous nature of what was happening to the country and point toward what, if anything, could be done to stop it. On the latter question, I suggested that the revolution might be countered when ordinary Americans who were at first casually sympathetic to it came to understand the destruction it could wreak on their everyday lives. Once that happened, I speculated, elected officials might read the national mood and recognize revolutionary policies as a political liability. The response to my essay was overwhelmingly favorable, but detractors saw it as unwarranted catastrophism. And among those who agreed, some expressed a desire for more pragmatic and concrete steps to undo the damage taking place before our eyes.

It’s been roughly a year and half since takeoff, and the revolution has attained cruising altitude. Perhaps the relative peace since that summer makes it...
tempting to reframe the national convulsions of 2020 as a short-lived outgrowth of the Trump years. And perhaps the ongoing distortions of pandemic life have served to camouflage the enduring distortions of the revolution on our politics and culture.

Looking at the state of things, however, it’s clear that my characterization of events has proved sadly accurate.

But so, too, have my hopes for how the revolution would be countered.

All evidence indicates that the revolutionaries have seen steady progress on many fronts. Their impact on the country has been both gargantuan and lasting. But there is real cause for hope. Because the revolution has systematically intruded on the safety and well-being of everyday citizens, a growing movement of Americans is rejecting it. And these anti-revolutionaries have won some big battles. What’s more, several key political figures—liberals, in fact—have turned against some of the revolution’s core demands. Yes, it’s still a revolution. But it’s now also a fight

Soon after the summer of 2020, the mass riots ceased. The armed occupied zones of the cities in the Pacific Northwest vanished. Congressional Democrats threw off their multicolored stoles and rose to their feet. The cancellations and denunciations of those who offend revolutionary sensibilities faded from the front page. So, too, did stories about tearing down historic statues, the reshaping of institutions around identity politics, and radical demands to cancel rent payments. And, finally, calls for defunding the police quieted down. It’s easy to look at this seeming de-escalation as evidence that the revolution never quite got off the ground after all.

But look closer. The riots stopped because the rioters and armed occupiers achieved their aims, and in no time at all. The police were comprehensively defunded. By the start of 2021, New York City had stripped its police budget of almost $1 billion, with ex-Mayor Bill de Blasio’s promise to do so secured on July 1, 2020, one month after the revolution began. Around the same time, Los Angeles cut $150 million from the LAPD. Philadelphia did the same, to the tune of $33 million. The list goes on. At least a dozen major American cities choked off great sums once directed toward law enforcement.

The anti-landlord sentiment behind rent cancellation, a fringe demand in 2020, partially informed President Joe Biden’s attempt to extend a moratorium on evictions this past fall—a move the president himself understood ran afoul of the Constitution.

As for historical statues, what’s left to report? They’ve already been torn down (or renamed or relocated), more than 100 so far.

We hear less and less about the banishing of heretics precisely because such cancellations have achieved a steady pace that ensures no specific instance becomes especially newsworthy. Here’s a tip. Do a Google search for “professor fired” and you’ll get so many hits, you’ll think you typed in “kittens pics.” And the results show how busy the inquisitors have been in academia alone. A few examples chosen at random: In May, Hannah Berliner Fischthal, a 20-year adjunct instructor at St. John’s University in New York, was dismissed for reading to her class a passage that contained the N-word. What was the work from which Fischthal read? Mark Twain’s 1894 anti-slavery novel *Pudd’nhead Wilson,* which satirizes the evils of racism.

The details of this case highlight the standard operational pattern for prosecuting speech crimes on
the post-revolutionary campus. After Fischthal read
the passage, she received an email from a student who
found Twain's words "painful to hear." Fischthal then
apologized extravagant, recommending future class
discussion of the offending words. In response, more
students pined on to complain. Fischthal was soon
called into a meeting and suspended, pending an in-
vestigation. Two days later, she was fired

In September, Bright Sheng, an esteemed profes-
sor at the University of Michigan, screened the 1965
version of Othello in his composition seminar. The fil-
tures Laurence Olivier in blackface, so offended
students complained. The dean of the university's
School of Music, Theatre & Dance then issued a de-
nunciation. "Professor Sheng's actions," the dean said,
"do not align with our School's commitment to anti-
racist action, diversity, equity and inclusion." The dean
further noted that the screening had been reported to
the university's Office of Equity, Civil Rights, and Title
IX. Sheng, in standard Cultural Revolution fashion,
issued his own apology to students. The students then
deemed his apology "inflammatory," and his course
was suspended. Sheng soon stepped down, and he is
not currently teaching.

Also in September, Christopher Trogan, an
English instructor at Fordham University, acciden-
tally confused the names of two black students. The
students then sent Trogan an outraged email accusing
him of mixing up their names because of the profes-
sor's supposed inability to distinguish between indi-
idual black people. Trogan, naturally, apologized to
the students and tried to explain that he'd identify
one student by the other's name simply because he was
simultaneously reading that name on a list in front of
him. He further went on to describe his lifelong effort
to fight for social justice and fairness. As we see once
again, it's the apology that does you in. "We weren't
too bothered by him mispronouncing our names," said
one of the students involved. "It was more about the
strange things he'd say in response." Apparently, Tro-
gan's apology merely tipped students off to his "white
savior complex." The university put Trogan under in-
vestigation, and by October he was fired, never having
learned the charges against him.

What we never hear about are the many more
cases of those individuals who avoid cancellation be-
cause they've thoroughly internalized the approved
words and practices that keep them out of the revolu-
tionary dock. Show up at your diversity and inclusion
seminar, ask no questions, say yes to the radicals, and
signal your anti-racist outrage whenever the news
cycle demands. Such protective measures have be-
come part of our new national consciousness, and the
acquiescence of the dispirited managerial class has
contributed to our notional sense of calm. What looks
like comity is functionally subjugation.

Higher up, those at the executive level have ad-
opted the revolution wholesale, repurposing a broad
range of endeavors to pursue identity-based ends. An-
ti-racism's institutional penetration is practically total,
with the media and entertainment industries leading
the way. Racial and gender segregation in popular
fare is so de rigueur that it hardly came as a surprise
this past December to see streaming holiday movies
categorized according to "African-American Leads," "Latinx Leads," "Female Leads," and so on. This is to
say nothing of the year-round options to choose mov-
ies from categories such as "Black Voices," "LGBTQ+
Voices," etc. In October, Netflix ran a docu-fi tion
series produced by and starring Colin Kaepernick in
which the quarterback-turned-revolutionary painted
a portrait of a racist America where millionaire ath-
letes are the new slaves.

In theater, the revolution initially sparked a se-
ries of small explosions. Activist performers circulated
manifestos, and theater heads were soon toppled for
being insufficiently revolutionary. By the time the fall
2021 theater season rolled around, at least seven plays
by black writers were slated to run on Broadway. As
Michael Paulson reported in the New York Times,
"the previous season, there was one such play, and the sea-
son before that, zero." The point isn't that the addition
of these black-authored works are bad. The plays will
stand or fall on their merits. It's that a new dispensa-
tion has been established.

The world of sports, too, has been conquered. In
July, the Cleveland Indians announced that they will
henceforth be the Cleveland Guardians, lest the old
name offend revolutionary sensibilities. Polls indicate
that most Native Americans have no problem with
the term Indian, and many see it as a point of ances-
tral pride. But they had little say in shaping the 2020
revolution. In the wake of George Floyd's murder, the
National Football League's social-justice arm, Inspire
Change, pledged to give $250 million to identarian ac-
tivist causes over the course of 10 years. In 2021, we saw
where the money was being spent. Hundreds of thou-
sands went to the Vera Institute of Justice, the Oregon
Justice Resource Center, and the Community Justice
Exchange. All these organizations support defund-
ing the police, and some support abolishing police,
prisons, and immigration enforcement altogether. In
one of the more bizarre sports moments of 2021, ESPN
released a solemn documentary about the "noose inci-

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The word ‘race,’ in fact, explained by genetics, inheritance and other biological factors, is a notion that differences among humans could be categorized by a particular phenotype. It led to the false dichotomy of nature versus nurture and spawned a field of behavioral psychology grounded in the idea of racial blackness. The revolution has even reached the heavens, as the field of astronomy is also now in thrall to social justice. And Pomona College has a mandatory course entitled “Decolonizing Physics.”

The revolution has even reached the heavens, as the field of astronomy is also now in thrall to social justice. And Pomona College has a mandatory course entitled “Decolonizing Physics.” Nor is this tendency confined to higher education. The NASA-sponsored Astro2020 survey, released in late 2021 by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, emphasizes “specific steps that the agencies can take towards increasing diversity, equity and sustainability.”

Naturally, the field of biology, with its unsettling nature-vs.-nurture paradigm, has been targeted by the revolution. When the American biologist E.O. Wilson died in December 2021, social-justice activists wrote a spate of articles accusing the late evolution expert of racism—without a scintilla of evidence. Of course, leading institutions got in on the act. Scientific American published “The Complicated Legacy of E.O. Wilson.” In it, the author explained Wilson’s thought crime thus: “His influential text Sociobiology: The New Synthesis contributed to the false dichotomy of nature versus nurture and spawned an entire field of behavioral psychology grounded in the notion that differences among humans could be explained by genetics, inheritance and other biological mechanisms.”

Some companies may soon face penalties if they don’t have a certain number of women or people of color on their boards. California could start assessing fines to companies based in the state that don’t abide by its rules after Dec. 31. Nasdaq-listed companies will be required to publish a standardized template of board-level diversity statistics starting in 2022, and must have at least one diverse director—or explain why they haven’t—starting in 2023. Institutional investors and proxy advisers have also said they may vote against director nominees if the company’s board isn’t sufficiently diverse.

As the representative of one advisory firm told the Journal, “the progress we’re seeing is as much about investor pressure and engagement on the issue as it is legal mandates.”

What the government doesn’t mandate, woke corporatism enforces. This includes the restraints on speech imposed by social-media and tech giants. Twitter continues to ban offensive right-wingers, such as President Donald Trump or Marjorie Taylor Greene, while granting carte blanche to globally influential conspiracy theorists and bigots, such as Iran’s Ayatol-
lah Ali Khamenei. Twitter and Facebook label genuine news stories—whether about Hunter Biden or the COVID lab-leak hypothesis—as misinformation and kill them off. Amazon and Apple try to wipe the right-leaning Parler app off the Web, and so on.

Major corporations also now jump to weigh in on the side of the revolution at every bit of breaking news. In March, for example, Georgia passed a benign voting-reform law deemed racist by the left. Companies including Apple, JPMorgan Chase, Delta, and Coca-Cola immediately issued statements of denunciation. Major League Baseball (sports again) announced it would no longer be holding the All-Star Game in the Peach State. When Texas passed a new strict abortion law in September, the corporate response was decidedly more muted. This was a telling development that enables us to distinguish between revolutionary causes and the plain old left. According to Pew, the pro-choice position is supported by 59 percent of the country. Corporate support would risk alienating 41 percent of the country. But, more to the point, abortion is outside the revolution’s race-centric purview.

In short, things seem calm because the institutions have already been taken over. Riots would only be superfluous now. The explosive and disorienting onset of the revolution has given way to the boring bureaucratic phase. To further abuse the flight metaphor, the revolution is now on autopilot.

During the first year of the pandemic, Americans often spoke of some “new normal” to come. But the focus on post-pandemic norms served to obscure another pressing question: What would a post-revolutionary normal look like? We now have our answer. It’s staring us in the face—at work, at school, in government, and on the screens that populate our everyday existence. It’s permeated our system of manners, dictating what can be said by whom and what must never be spoken at all. Unless you live off the grid, it’s in the sounds you hear, the images you see, the air you breathe. It’s why you—or at least someone you know—look over your shoulder and make sure to lower your voice when saying something anti-revolutionary in public.

But while the institutions have buckled to the revolution, not all private citizens have lowered their voice. Those who go along to get along have made their peace with the revolution because they find their lives pleasant enough under the new regime. A bit of virtue-signaling here and there is no great sacrifice. But what happens when the revolution comes for your children? And what if it threatens your physical safety? For many Americans, it has. And they now stand as the front line in our fight.

Science and medicine have continued on the revolutionary path first blazed in 2020, when public-health figures announced that mass gatherings were pandemic-safe just so long as they were in support of social justice.

While revolutionaries seek to reeducate adults through occasional diversity-and-inclusion seminars, their prescription for school-age children is immersive. In counties throughout the United States, schools have incorporated critical race theory (CRT) into their curricula. There’s much confusion and obfuscation about what CRT is, but it’s very simple. CRT maintains that all the systems that undergird the functioning of the United States are racist by design and produce inequitable results for people of color. All systems—social, governmental, legal, financial, educational, medical, you name it. In practice, this means teaching white children that they are, above all else, oppressors and teaching black children that they are, first and foremost, victims.

Here’s how that’s played out in the classroom since the start of the revolution. In Springfield, Mis-
souri, a group of middle-school kids are made to locate themselves on an “oppression matrix” based on their racial make-up. The worst oppressors among them are then forced to acknowledge and atone for their “covert white supremacy.” At a charter school in Las Vegas, seniors are made to articulate the aspects of their identity that confer privilege. Third-graders in Cupertino, California, are told that they exist in a “dominant culture,” where the “white, middle class, cisgender, educated, able-bodied, Christian, English speaker” reigns supreme. With this knowledge instilled, they’re made to write essays about the relative “power and privilege” of their identities.

CRT proponents employ a cute cover story to deflect attention from this unambiguous horror. According to the story, CRT merely teaches that racism and slavery have been integral parts of American history, and any complaints about it are expressions of racism from white parents who don’t want their kids fully educated.

It’s hard to make that story stick, however, when schools send out memos asking parents to “decenter whiteness at home and in [their] family,” as did a private primary school in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. And the story loses credibility when a black child comes home from school and strikes up a conversation with his parents about his limited horizons as a permanent victim. As the outraged father of one black school-age child said in a wildly popular TikTok video: “My baby is going to know that no matter what she wants to be in life, all she has to do is work hard and she can become that…. So we need to stop CRT point-blank.”

It didn’t take long for parents of all races to figure out that their children were being indoctrinated into a repellent ideology. Since the implementation of CRT at the school level began, genuine parental resistance to it bubbled up steadily—and that resistance was continually dismissed by liberal politicians and media as manufactured publicity by scare-mongering Republicans. Even so, stories kept pouring in about outraged parents challenging the curriculum at school-board meetings, trying to recall board members, and even filing lawsuits against schools teaching CRT. In December 2020, the black mother of one of those Las Vegas seniors sued the school for creating a hostile learning environment. In June 2021, a student’s mother file a lawsuit against the Loudoun County School Board, charging that its so-called Action Plan to Combat Systemic Racism was, in fact, “an explicit initiative to stifle speech under the guise of eliminating ‘bias.’”

These and other efforts bore fruit. Cherokee County, Georgia, banned CRT after parents rose up en masse. Parents also forced California to abandon a
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ate Democrats understand that CRT is a losing issue. Whether they take on the revolutionaries in their midst remains to be seen.

Public pressure, however, has forced Democrats to do a public about-face on the issue that was most crucial to the revolution: defunding the police. After the onset of the revolution and the subsequent defunding of multiple police departments, something horribly predictable happened. Violent crime skyrocketed in nearly every major American city. According to an FBI report released in September, between 2019 and 2020, assaults rose 12.4 percent and murders increased by 29.4 percent, the largest increase since at least 1905, and maybe ever. Increases were even more dramatic in some states. New York's murder rate rose by 47 percent, Illinois's by 38 percent, and California's by 36 percent. In the enfeebled city of Portland, Oregon, the homicide rate went up by a staggering 83 percent. And in 2021, violent crime kept on rising. According to ABC News, at least 12 major cities broke their previous yearly homicide records in 2021. Los Angeles homicides went up 13 percent since 2020. Homicides in Houston rose by 18 percent during the same period.

Politicians can spin just about anything. But they can't tell you to feel safe when you don't. By March of 2021, an Ipsos/USA TODAY poll found that only 18 percent of Americans supported defunding the police. What's more, only 28 percent of black Americans supported the policy. It can be hard for a movement built around the phrase “Black Lives Matter” to justify policies that result in black lives murdered. And no group of Americans suffered more from defunding the police than African Americans. According to data from the Marshall Project, more than 85 percent of the 2020 spike in murders occurred in black and Hispanic neighborhoods.

As 2021 came to a close, the defund movement was on its knees. And supporters of the policy paid the price. On the same Election Day that saw Terry McAuliffe go down in flames, multiple defunding advocates were voted out of office. In Seattle, mayoral candidate Bruce Harrell, who stated plainly, “Make no mistake about it: I'm not defunding the police,” defeated incumbent fellow Democrat Jenny Durkan, who had sought to take a razor to the police budget before a too-late change of heart. In New York City, Democrat Eric Adams, who'd sunk all pro-defund adversaries in the mayoral primary, won the general election by 72.8 percent. His campaign mantra: “The prerequisite for prosperity is public safety.” The city by then had long turned on former mayor Bill de Blasio, the man who had not only cut $1 billion from the police budget but had also disbanded the NYPD plainclothes anti-crime unit. In Buffalo, police abolitionist and socialist India Walton lost the mayoral election by double digits to pro-police Democratic incumbent Byron W. Brown, whose name wasn't even on the ballot, owing to his defeat at her hands in the primary. And in Minneapolis, ground zero for the revolution, voters rejected the Question 2 Public Safety Initiative that would have replaced the police department entirely with a department of public safety.

Along with the defund campaign's political defeats came the high-profile renunciations. “I think allowing this moniker, 'Defund the police,' to ever get out there, was not a good thing,” said Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison, who had supported Question 2. Some progressive Democrats, such as New York Representatives Jamaal Bowman and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, merely took to speaking about dismantling police in softer tones.

But the most stunning turnaround came from San Francisco's Democratic mayor, London Breed. In the wake of George Floyd's murder, Breed held a press conference to announce that San Francisco would be the forerunner in the defund movement, and she promptly cut $120 million from local law enforcement. By the end of 2020, according to the Public Policy Institute of California, San Francisco had the highest rate of burglaries, car thefts, and arsons in the state. In 2021, burglaries rose by another 50 percent.

What does Breed have to say for herself now? “Our compassion cannot be mistaken for weakness or indifference,” she announced in December. “It is time for the reign of criminals to end.... And it comes to an end when are we more aggressive with law enforcement and less tolerant of all the bulls**t that has destroyed our city.” The tough talk came with an emergency request to the city Board of Supervisors for more police spending.

By the end of 2021, a significant number of major American cities, among them New York, Austin, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Baltimore, had boosted their investment in law enforcement.

Defund is dead.
rejecting the Democratic Party and the revolution's radical policies advanced for the supposed benefit of "people of color." In a Democracy Fund Voter Study Group survey done after last November's election, Hispanics opposed defunding or shrinking the police by at least 2 to 1. The term woke, once embraced as a kind of revolutionary catch-all, is in bad odor, with radicals running away from the label at every turn. Additionally, nonrevolutionary liberal thinkers and writers continue to gain influence, most impressively demonstrated in John McWhorter's anti-revolution Woke Racism becoming a bestseller at the start of the winter. Keep in mind that liberals and conservatives live in separate political time zones. Liberals tend to wake up to bad news about the revolution long after conservatives have gone to bed knowing the same thing.

And despite the fact that American institutions are in the revolution's grip, there's even a (small, but encouraging) hint of change afoot in Big Entertainment. When Netflix faced trans-activist protests, condemnations, and employee walkouts over its airing of comedian Dave Chappelle's latest special in September, the streaming giant stood its ground. The same company that gave us Colin Kaepernick's football-plantation fantasy refused to budge. And it's doing just fine. The special was a huge hit. Whether other companies will take this as a model to replicate when they're under pressure remains to be seen. But the incident points toward our best hope for the dismantling of the revolution at the institutional level: the profit incentive. How long can major corporations afford to dish out radical content and products to a marginal consumer base while ignoring the larger American public who just wants quality?

In the time since I wrote "Yes, This Is a Revolution," a discouraging new element has also been added to the mix. This is the growth of anti-Americanism on the right. When Donald Trump persuaded millions of voters that our presidential elections were fraudulent, he did more than unleash a one-day attack on the Capitol. He transformed a significant portion of the country from patriots into revolutionaries. As I heard one January 6 supporter claim: "There's nothing to preserve. The system is rotten." That's the justification for the 2020 revolution, only from a different direction. Many of the people who were once allies in the fight against leftist radicalism have now defected to the fight against American exceptionalism. We can only hope that this changes with the vicissitudes of politics in the coming years.

America is exceptional and there is everything to preserve. As I wrote in my piece in 2020, "because the United States is fundamentally good, most Americans may, in time, become circumspect about tearing it all down." The truth of that contention is being born out in the shrinking status of CRT and the restoration of law and order. Being told that you are destined to be only your race, never an individual, cuts against the American creed. And when the pursuit of happiness is undermined by the threat of violence, we have failed to remain a country of laws. Those circumstances could not stand. Social-justice organizations now have to justify the massive sums they've received from corporate America. There will be new hoops for people to jump through in the name of equity. And as the burden imposed by these programs becomes ever more onerous, Americans' tolerance for them is likely to wear thin. The one place where citizens can freely reject the revolution is in the privacy of the voting booth. We very well might see a continuation of the trends that dislodged defund and CRT advocates in November. And perhaps as the larger aims of the revolution are dismantled, Americans will find the courage to reject its more subtle manifestations and be "less tolerant of all the bulls**t." This means speaking one's mind in a clear voice, standing up for the wrongfully accused, saying no to wretched schemes, and living a life guided by the moral compass of the old normal. The fight has been joined.
IN LATE FEBRUARY 2020, we could see the COVID-19 tsunami coming, but it hadn’t yet hit U.S. shores with full force. Like any father, I wanted to make sure my family was safe. Since all three of my sons were living away from home, we started trading emails about the latest research and recommendations. President Trump’s chaotic management style was one concern: Would state, local, and federal governments be able to focus on fighting the pandemic in an atmosphere of political drama? I tried to reassure everyone:

Despite alarmist stories to the contrary, we have really good public-health officials and infrastructure in the U.S.,” I wrote in a family email on March 2, 2020. “They’ll do their jobs regardless of who is president.”

Oh, was I wrong.

Over the coming months I realized I had wildly overestimated the competence of our public-health bureaucracy. At a time when we needed our official to respond nimbly to a rapidly evolving threat, our health agencies proved slow and inflexible. When it came to providing workable tests for the virus, speeding up deliveries of protective equipment, or simply communicating clearly and honestly with the nation, our public-health establishment failed. It wasn’t just a matter of moving too slowly. At times, our health
bureaucrats actively obstructed doctors, researchers, private companies, and others trying to fight the pandemic. They even tried to limit the range of permissible scientific discussions about COVID-19, shutting down inquiries into the origins of the virus and debates about how it spreads.

The problem wasn’t that they lacked professionalism or empathy; as individuals, most are dedicated and conscientious. The problem is in the nature of the health bureaucracy itself. Its rules and traditions demanded they follow a cautious, plodding approach even in the middle of a galloping crisis. A hard-driving president can sometimes push the bureaucracy to move faster than normal, as Trump did with Operation Warp Speed. And federal agencies are more likely to remain stuck in their ruts under a passive leader, as the Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control have mostly done during the Biden administration. But the limitations of our federal bureaucracies are pretty well baked in. Moreover, they haven’t been the only obstacles to fighting COVID.

Our leadership class as a whole has proved poorly equipped to deal with the pandemic, in part because it holds such a low opinion of the public it serves. Disease Control have mostly done during the Biden administration. But the limitations of our federal bureaucracies are pretty well baked in. Moreover, they haven’t been the only obstacles to fighting COVID. Our leadership class as a whole has proved poorly equipped to deal with the pandemic, in part because it holds such a low opinion of the public it serves.

EARLY IN the pandemic, I wrote an article for Commentary about lessons from the 1964 Alaska earthquake. My piece described how, in the hours after the quake, Anchorage official deputized teams of patrolmen to control the panicked mobs and looters they assumed would soon rampage through the city. “At the time,” I wrote, “most experts believed any major disaster would cause ‘a mass outbreak of hysterical neurosis among the civilian population,” as social scientist Richard M. Titmuss had put it.... Only firm control by powerful authorities could keep the lid on such dangerous situations.” In the end, those mobs and looters never materialized. Instead, Anchorage civilians immediately started working together to search damaged buildings, clear rubble, and care for survivors.

Such calm and cooperative responses to disasters are common—the norm, in fact. Think of the stalwart way Londoners carried on through German bombing attacks in World War II. But people in positions of authority—police, government officials, the media—generally expect the worst from their fellow citizens when trouble strikes. As a result, they tend to see themselves as a bulwark against a dangerous and irresponsible populace. Disaster researchers call this phenomenon “elite panic.” It’s a slightly melodramatic term, but it captures the way people in authority often focus more on controlling the public than on fighting the catastrophe. In disasters ranging from Hurricane Katrina to Fukushima, I wrote, officials have tended to “clamp down on information, restrict freedom of movement, and devote unnecessary energy to enforcing laws they assume are about to be broken.”

Does this sound familiar? As we’ve all seen, the COVID-19 pandemic has been one long case study in elite panic. From Day One, the CDC, the FDA, and other agencies have tried to maintain the tightest possible control over how Americans behave in the crisis. Case in point: On February 4, 2020, the FDA issued an emergency authorization allowing the use of a COVID-19 test kit developed by the CDC. Various independent laboratories and health organizations had developed their own tests, but none of those were approved. In fact, organizations that wanted to use their own tests simply to research the spread of COVID were threatened with legal action. Thousands of laboratories capable of processing millions of tests were sidelined.
Across the U.S., researchers and health organizations were desperate to get in the fight against COVID. But the CDC and the FDA essentially told them: Leave the job to the experts. To the bureaucratic mind, an ad hoc and decentralized approach to testing was unthinkable. In the end, the CDC’s test didn’t even work. The experts had bungled the job while simultaneously forbidding others from trying different approaches. At the time, many observers hoped that this testing debacle was a temporary misstep. Sadly, it was a template.

When the FDA finally moved to start approving independently developed tests, the laboratories seeking authorization ran straight into a bureaucratic maze. The virus was spreading by the day, but the FDA’s complex procedures couldn’t be streamlined. Instead of submitting applications online, for example, labs were required to encode their data on CD-ROM disks and send those in by mail. (Note to younger readers: CD-ROM is a largely obsolete data-storage format. Big in the 1990s.) By the time other tests were approved, it was too late to help track the initial spread of the disease.

The fight against COVID would require “an immediate intervention to break America free from its bureaucratic addiction,” warned good-government advocate Philip K. Howard in an April 2020 City Journal article. That never happened. If anything, our public health bureaucracies became more entrenched, while their power over everyday life expanded exponentially. Even the simplest initiatives got bogged down. Everyone remembered that masks and other types of personal protective equipment were in desperately short supply during the early months. But fewer people know that manufacturers were standing by, clamoring to deliver perfectly acceptable substitutes for the approved brands of PPE. Hold on, the CDC told them. First they’d have to go through the agency’s laborious approval process—which could take as long as three months.

The health bureaucracy’s check-every-box mentality isn’t just inertia. (And, of course, during normal times we want these officials to be meticulous.) It’s part of the culture. The CDC and the FDA exhibit a tendency I called the precautionary paradox in another 2020 Commentary column. The precautionary paradox is literally an excess of caution: Many safety-conscious organizations develop elaborate rules and procedures to limit risk, and any proposed changes to those rules must be justified by mountains of data. Normally, that focus on rules really does enhance safety. But in an emergency, an organization needs to move quickly—there isn’t time to conduct endless studies. In those cases, being too rule-bound makes us less safe.

Simple, commonsense decisions get delayed. Common sense would say that a mask that’s almost as effective as the CDC-approved version is better than nothing. But that wasn’t good enough for the CDC regulators. As a result, those almost-as-good masks were held up for months. The agency’s misplaced caution meant hospital workers had to go to war against COVID wearing homemade masks and drugstore shower caps.

In any disaster, one of the government’s most critical tasks is clear, honest communication. Here too, our leaders stumbled, and our news media compounded the damage. Even today, the messages from U.S. politicians, health officials, and media outlets reflect a weird combination of the precautionary paradox and elite panic. If this unspoken ethos could be summed up in a motto, it would be: You can’t be too careful, and you can’t trust the public. Since these leaders don’t think people will act responsibly on their own, they feel justified in shading the truth in ways meant to nudge us toward proper behavior. In the early weeks of the pandemic, that meant downplaying the potential severity of the disease. Politicians worried that pandemic panic might tank the stock market or set off spasms of anti-Asian xenophobia. So leaders ranging from Trump to New York Mayor de Blasio all urged the public to “go about your business” or to “come to Chinatown!” as Senator Nancy Pelosi famously urged in February 2020.

But once authorities pivoted to lockdowns as the universal COVID strategy, it became more common for officials and the press to exaggerate the risks of various activities. Even early on, it was clear that people were safer outdoors than indoors. Nonetheless, local governments closed playgrounds, and newspapers ran endless pictures of “crowded” Florida beaches as if to shame the reckless Floridians who dared venture into the sunlight. Experts knew these fears were excessive, but most went along with the charade. I suspect they thought pumping up the paranoia might help keep the public in line in other settings as well.

From the start, some officials have indulged in what they probably believe to be noble lies. In March 2020, when Dr. Anthony Fauci told 60 Minutes, “There’s no reason to be walking around with a mask,” he wasn’t giving his scientific opinion about the efficacy of mask-wearing. As he later admitted, he was trying to discourage the public from buying masks in order to preserve supplies for health-care workers. Why didn’t he just say that in the first place? Because he didn’t trust the public to do the right thing. When the CDC reversed course a few weeks later and began touting the scientific rationale for mask-wearing,
many Americans realized they’d been lied to.

That was the start of a continuing string of half-truths, factual manipulations, and telling omissions on the part of our public health elite. In particular, officials are willing to bend the truth if they think it will cajole the public into getting vaccinated. Fauci several times changed his estimate of how many people would need to be vaccinated in order to reach herd immunity. He later admitted that he revised the numbers not because the science had changed but in order to persuade more people. “I thought, I can nudge this up a bit,” he said.

During the Omicron surge in late 2021, New York’s Department of Health announced a scary spike in the number of children hospitalized with COVID. It made headlines. Later, the state’s health commissioner had to admit that those children were generally admitted with COVID, rather than because of COVID, and that the overall numbers were small. But the department had a legitimate reason to frighten the public, she said: “It really is to motivate pediatricians and families to seek the protection of vaccination.” As the radiologist and public-health advocate Pradheep Shanker responded on Twitter, “These clowns are undermining faith in the health care system for a generation.”

Under Biden-appointed director Rochelle Walensky, the CDC has shown an unseemly deference to the concerns of teachers’ unions. In interviews and briefings, she often cites an Arizona study that found schools without mask mandates were 3.5 times more likely to have COVID outbreaks than schools where children are masked. But, as the Atlantic’s David Zweig showed, the study Walensky likes to reference is a wild outlier, one whose methodology was so sloppy one researcher called it “ridiculous.” In fact, evidence that children need to be masked in schools is dubious at best.

This steady drip-drip-drip of misleading or politically motivated statements has taken its toll, especially since they come from officials who claim to represent objective science. And if the statements aren’t accurate, what are we to make of the policies based on them? At the start of the pandemic, polls showed most Americans—including conservatives—were generally willing to accept business lockdowns, masks, school closures, and similar measures, at least for the short term. “Trust the science,” we were relentlessly admonished, and most people did—at first. But as the months rolled on, we learned that the science behind these measures was surprisingly tenuous. Many COVID policies turned out to be based less on science than on a general fear of allowing citizens to move about freely or make their own decisions.

But that didn’t stop officials from enforcing arbitrary COVID restrictions with zeal. Governors, mayors, and local officials almost seemed to relish micromanaging people’s daily lives. Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer issued rules dictating which hardware-store aisles could remain open and which had to close. Louisville mayor Greg Fisher moved to ban drive-in Easter church services in his Kentucky city and threatened to record the license plates of violators. Police in Encinitas, California, ticketed people for “watching the sunset” on a local beach. Because you can’t be too careful.

In New York State, Governor Andrew Cuomo mandated that bars could stay open only if they served plates of food along with beverages. Bars without kitchens began serving plates of “Cuomo chips” alongside glasses of beer. That measure at least had a humorous side. Cuomo’s signature COVID policy—forcing nursing homes to accept COVID patients discharged from hospitals—is believed to have contributed to perhaps 1,000 or more fatalities. We now know that just as Cuomo was basking in media plaudits for his supposedly masterful handling of the pandemic, his administration was busy concealing the data on nursing-home deaths. This wouldn’t be the last time that scientific data was distorted or misused for political ends during the pandemic.

At the federal level, the CDC assumed unprecedented new powers. In addition to issuing sweeping “recommendations” that states and cities were expected to follow, the agency claimed direct authority over matters that would normally be the province of Congress or state governments. As part of the March 2020 CARES Act, Congress included a limited moratorium on evicting nonpaying tenants. When that moratorium expired in July 2020, the CDC stepped in and issued a much broader eviction ban, one that covered properties nationwide and included criminal penalties for landlords.

How did this happen? The CDC’s authority derived from the 1944 Public Health Services Act, which gives federal officials license to perform functions such as “inspection, fumigation, disinfection, sanitation, pest extermination,” and so on. Nowhere does it mention the wholesale negation of private property rights. Of course, the argument that evicting delinquent tenants would inevitably spread COVID was tenuous at best. Nonetheless, the CDC repeatedly extended the order for over a year. In the end, the Supreme Court had to swat down the agency’s unconstitutional overreach.

The Pandemic Public-Health Disaster: February 2022
Other agencies also expanded their remits. In September 2021, Biden ordered the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to issue an “emergency” policy forcing companies with 100 or more workers to require their employees be vaccinated. George Mason University law professor Ilya Somin writes that the OSHA mandate “effectively gives presidential administrations a blank check to control nearly every aspect of every workplace in the country.” This measure also landed before the Supreme Court, which seems inclined to reject it. Still, some justices ratted observers by repeating wild misinformation about COVID-19. Justice Sonia Sotomayor asserted that 100,000 children are hospitalized, “many on ventilators.” In truth, fewer than 5,000 coronavirus-positive children were in hospitals at the time, most for other conditions.

At every level of government, the precautionary paradox ruled. Once a particular order was in place, the burden of proof shifted: Public health official didn’t have to show that lockdowns and other measures were worth their enormous costs; instead, it was up to lockdown opponents to prove that reopening would be safe. At the same time, our definition of safety shifted. What began as “two weeks to stop the spread” turned into an effort to eradicate COVID entirely. That gave teachers’ unions, for example, the clout to argue that if reopening schools would lead to even a handful of new cases, that was reason enough to keep them closed.

It will take years to assess the widespread economic, psychological, and social damage caused by these excessive restrictions. But we already know that poor children in particular have fallen far behind because of school closures. Michael Petrilli of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute told Politico, “We haven’t seen this kind of academic achievement crisis in living memory.” And the emotional fallout is growing. The American Academy of Pediatrics recently warned of “soaring rates of mental health challenges among children, adolescents, and their families.” The CDC says attempted suicides among young teenage girls are up sharply. It’s particularly heartbreaking given that children have never been at much risk from COVID. As the New York Times’ David Leonhardt notes, American society “accepted more harm to children in exchange for less harm to adults.” With the explosion in Omicron cases, teachers’ unions again began pushing for school shutdowns. As I write this, Chicago schools are closed thanks to a teachers’ strike. Because you just can’t be too careful.

Perhaps the biggest blow to elite credibility on COVID came after the George Floyd killing in May 2020. While protestors flooded the streets in defiance of COVID guidelines, public health officials were mostly silent—or cheering from the sidelines. A group of 1,288 self-described health experts and “community stakeholders” signed a letter encouraging the protests because “White supremacy is a lethal public health issue.” We now know that outdoor gatherings are not major spreaders of COVID-19. But at that time, virtually all outdoor events—music festivals, sporting events, weddings, funerals—were suspended. Previously, group singing had been implicated as a key element in super-spreader events. Now suddenly, Americans were being encouraged to pack the streets, singing, chanting, and shouting for hours on end.

“At least for me, the sudden change in views of the danger of mass gatherings has been disorienting,” former Harvard Medical School dean Jeffrey Flier told Politico, “and I suspect it has been for many Americans.” It wasn’t just disorienting; for many—and not just for conservatives—the flip-flo revealed a maddening hypocrisy. “That episode single-handedly destroyed trust in public health officials, proving they’d politicize their expertise when convenient,” wrote left-wing gadfly Glenn Greenwald.

But even as they overreached in trying to regulate our daily lives—Don’t go to work! Do go out and protest!—health officials have remained weirdly hesitant to try to learn everything possible about the virus. At times they’ve even lashed out at scientists who raise uncomfortable questions. In the early weeks, several prominent virologists wondered whether COVID-19 might be related to research at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which is a major center for studying this family of viruses. But in February 2020, a group of eminent virus researchers jointly published a letter in the Lancet, a leading medical journal, denouncing the lab-leak question as a “conspiracy theory.” Top U.S. officials and the World Health Organization echoed the accusation and the news media eagerly doubled down, calling the notion “debunked” despite the lack of any investigation.

Why such a backlash? Elite panic was a big part of it: Some members of the public-health establishment openly worried that discussing China’s possible culpability would stir up xenophobia and anti-Asian violence. Mainstream journalists and the social-media giants—always leery of topics they fear will rile up the right—worked hard to deepen the story. (“Someday we will stop talking about the lab leak theory and maybe even admit its racist roots,” a New York Times science reporter wrote on Twitter. “But alas, that day is not yet here.”) Another factor was the creeping politicization of COVID-19 science: Among the people

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asking about a possible lab leak were conservatives and Trump supporters. Some scientists later admitted that that fact alone meant they couldn’t discuss the question, even if they thought it had merit. The media quickly concluded that the lab-leak theory had been ginned up by Republicans for political gain. The Atlantic’s David Frum even compared it to the anti-Communist witch hunts of the 1950s. Instead of weighing the evidence, the media framed the debate in Manichean terms: Whose side are you on? It took over a year before independent researchers and a few brave journalists managed to drag the issue into the sunlight.

Perhaps the most ominous factor in the suppression of the lab-leak story was institutional self-preservation. We eventually learned that the U.S. National Institutes of Health, along with Dr. Anthony Fauci and several of the scientists involved with the Lancet letter, had been working closely with the Wuhan lab and had funded some controversial research there. Instead of putting their cards on the table, and perhaps facing some tough questions from Congress and the public, these public-health leaders tried to bury the whole topic. Even today, much of the vital information about the origin of COVID and the relationship between U.S. officials and the Wuhan lab remains under wraps. So much for transparent scientific inquiry.

The Public Health elite also showed a profound lack of curiosity about exactly how COVID-19 behaves in the environment. From the start, the WHO, the CDC, and other health agencies were confident that the virus spreads much like other respiratory viruses: through “close contact” with infected people. That would include breathing in the “respiratory droplets” people emit when they breathe, or touching surfaces contaminated by such fluids. “The virus does not spread easily in other ways,” the CDC fl y asserted. Conventional wisdom held that such droplets usually settle to the ground within two meters, hence the advice we heard endlessly repeated: Stay six feet apart and “just wash your hands.” But the CDC’s guidance was based on shoddy science. Worse still, the CDC, the WHO, and other groups were refusing to listen to scientists who knew better.

As early as March 2020, experts in airborne disease transmission were marshaling evidence that the conventional wisdom on droplets was wrong. In fact, many of the particles exhaled by infected people were extremely small—tiny enough to be classified as aerosols, these scientists maintained—which meant they could stay aloft longer and infect others at much greater distances. Far from being rare, airborne transmission was “the dominant route for the spread of COVID-19,” one group of researchers concluded. Still, the CDC and the WHO refused to budge, even after an international group of 248 scientists published an open letter begging health agencies to acknowledge the airborne risk. It wasn’t until October 2020 that the CDC admitted COVID might “sometimes” be spread by air.

What took so long? Once again, our health bureaucracy was hobbled by a misguided sense of caution. Public health officials were reluctant to change their “close-contact” model without an enormous amount of evidence. Of course by being too cautious about changing its guidance, the CDC put Americans at greater risk. The agency could have told the public early on that airborne transmission was a real possibility even though the data weren’t conclusive. But that would have required asking the public to cope with a bit of nuance—and you can’t trust the public. Instead the CDC strongly downplayed the airborne angle, giving

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the public a false sense of security. People were washing their groceries when they should have been opening their windows. Even after the agency changed direction, it didn’t actively promote the necessary mitigation measures. Schools, businesses, nursing homes, and other institutions desperately needed advice on how to make their facilities safer. But it took over a year before the CDC began issuing detailed guidance on improving ventilation, upgrading air filters, and the like.

Not everything has gone badly during this pandemic. Even as we criticize some public health leaders, we should recognize the important and thankless work of many unnamed officials at the federal, state, and local levels. Doctors and medical researchers made huge, rapid strides in understanding and treating this confounding disease. And, of course, the development and approval of three vaccines in under a year was an unprecedented achievement. The public-private partnership embodied in Operation Warp Speed should be seen as a model for future emergencies.

But even the vaccine success story was tainted by politics. In the fall of 2020, a group of prominent medical experts, led by Scripps Research Institute professor Dr. Eric Topol, feared that Trump was applying untoward pressure on the FDA to approve the Pfizer vaccine before the election. The group publicly lobbied the FDA and Pfizer to push back the authorization process until later in the year, which they ultimately did. Topol celebrated the delay on his popular Twitter feed: “We were on a path for a vaccine emergency authorization (EUA) before November 3rd. Thanks to the FDA, Trump's plan was disrupted.”

Topol and his allies feared that if the public believed that Trump had put his thumb on the FDA's approval scale, it would undermine public trust in the vaccine. They might have been right about that. But delaying the rollout of a lifesaving vaccine by several weeks—at a time when COVID was killing 600 people each day—seems like an extreme solution to a hypothetical problem. More ominously, perhaps some advocates for slowing the authorization also worried that good news on vaccines might boost Trump's reelection chances. If so, the authorization delay would count as one of history's more cynical abuses of scientific authority for political ends.

In any event, it wasn’t only Republicans undermining confidence in the vaccines. On the campaign trail, both Biden and Kamala Harris flitted with the idea that any vaccine approved under Trump couldn’t be trusted. Harris told CNN she believed that under his presidency, honest public health experts would “be muzzled, they’ll be suppressed, they’ll be sidelined.”

Joe Biden won the presidency partly on the strength of his promise to “shut down the virus.” But he spent his early weeks in office emphasizing performative gestures such as canceling the Keystone XL pipeline. Then came the all-consuming battle to pass the Build Back Better bill. No doubt Biden's advisers assumed the vaccines would vanquish the pandemic, leaving them free to tackle more momentous goals. They never came up with an adequate plan to cope with follow-on waves of COVID-19 variants, even though experts had warned about that likelihood from the start.

A comprehensive pandemic plan would have addressed two realities: There will always be some people who refuse to be vaccinated. And no vaccine will be 100 percent effective. That means doctors still need an arsenal of treatments for the disease. And we need a robust testing capacity, including PCR tests and rapid at-home antigen tests. The Biden administration promised aggressive action on both fronts. But when Omicron hit in late 2021, the White House was caught flat-footed. With the holidays coming on and Omicron spreading, Americans rushed to buy home testing kits—if they could find or afford them. “It’s an outrage that rapid tests aren’t cheap and plentiful on grocery store shelves,” Yale School of Public Health professor David Paltiel told ProPublica. Meanwhile, PCR test centers were overloaded. In many cases, test facilities couldn’t promise to return results in less than three or four days.

As the outcry grew, the White House scrambled to address this entirely foreseeable problem. Biden himself seemed bewildered. “I wish I had thought about ordering a half a billion [tests] two months ago,” he told ABC News. In fact, his administration had repeatedly promised to make test kits widely available—and so had his campaign during 2020. (In most of Europe, kits are plentiful, and either free or dirt cheap.) The administration finally cobbled together a plan to make insurance companies reimburse the cost of test kits—if anyone could find them. It was all too little, too late.

Why didn’t U.S. public health agencies make home test kits a bigger priority? I think elite panic played a part: Home testing gives people personal control over their health information. The government doesn’t have access to the data from home kits, and it plays less of a role in telling users how to interpret the results. Obviously, people wouldn’t be buying the kits if they didn’t want to use the information to help keep themselves and others safer. (“Let’s all take a test before we go visit Grandma.”) If tests were cheaper and more widely available, those kinds of individual
decisions could do a lot to arrest the spread of COVID. But that would mean allowing people to use their own judgment. And you can’t trust the public.

A similar ambivalence might have undermined efforts to speed up the delivery of COVID-19 treatments. A handful of them, including monoclonal antibodies, were available when Biden came into office. Others were in the approval pipeline. Where was Biden’s version of Operation Warp Speed to move these treatments along? In late December 2021, the FDA authorized two promising oral treatments for COVID-19, Molnupiravir from Merck and Paxlovid from Pfizer. Paxlovid, in particular, seems to be a game-changer; in an 88-day study it reduced COVID-19 patients’ chances of hospitalization and death by 88 percent. But neither pharmaceutical company appears ready to deliver these drugs in the necessary quantities for several months.

When Omicron descended, demand for COVID treatments spiked. Although Omicron is milder than previous forms of COVID-19, it is infecting many more people. And some of those infections require aggressive treatment. But the needed drugs—including monoclonal antibodies that had been authorized in late 2020—were in short supply. Just as in the desperate early months of the pandemic, state governors are complaining that the federal government is hoarding vital medical supplies. But it isn’t early 2020; it’s 2022, and COVID-19 has been the central focus of our public-health establishment for two grueling years.

Why aren’t they ready for this not-particularly-deadly variant? There are several reasons, but a subtle antipathy toward treatments in general might be one. Earlier in the pandemic, many conservatives latched on to the (much disputed) benefits of treatments such as hydroxychloroquine and ivermectin, and public health officials and the media pushed back with a vengeance. When podcaster Joe Rogen announced he’d taken ivermectin, an anti-parasitic widely used in both human and veterinary medicine, CNN host Brian Stelter insisted on calling it “a horse deworming medication.”

Some health officials worried that if people believe that COVID-19 can be easily treated with drugs, they’ll be more reluctant to follow distancing and masking guidelines or to get vaccinated. So, like everything else COVID touched, the question of potential treatments became politicized. Conservatives became enamored with the idea of treatment, while the public health establishment and liberal elite wanted to keep the focus on prevention. Is it any wonder, then, why a truly groundbreaking treatment like Paxlovid has been greeted with somewhat muted enthusiasm?

Under Trump, skeptics worried he would force the FDA to cut corners on approvals. Under Biden, we seem to have the opposite problem. There has been no detectable sense of urgency in accelerating authorizations of new treatments or ramping up supplies as fast as safely possible. A key part of Operation Warp Speed involved subsidizing the manufacture of vaccines even before they were authorized. It was a gamble that allowed large numbers of doses to be made available almost immediately. The Biden White House did pre-order some doses of Paxlovid, but nowhere near enough to cope with Omicron. Not until January 4, 2022, did Biden announce that his administration would double its Paxlovid order to 20 million doses. They’ll all be here by...September.

Trump was justifiably criticized for his premature predictions that the virus would soon “just disappear.” But the Biden administration has proved every bit as over-optimistic as its predecessor. It had no plan to cope with new variant waves because it didn’t think it needed one. That might prove a blessing in disguise. With Omicron running rampant in blue states and elite communities, policymakers are finally accepting that the only real solution is something closer to the red-state approach: Vaccinate the willing, treat the sick, and let everyone carry on with their lives.

But this turnabout comes too late to repair the public’s trust in scientific institutions and in our leadership class in general. The American people entered this pandemic prepared to do whatever was necessary to fight the disease. But they’ve witnessed too much fudging and evasion from officials, too much media manipulation of the facts, and too many petty, unnecessary restrictions on daily life. Instead of regarding the public as engaged partners, our leaders treated American citizens as wayward children in constant need of being scolded, nudged, and even deceived into following the rules. Because you can’t be too careful. And you can’t trust the public.

When it came to public health, we were continually told to “trust the science.” But the scientists and public officials also needed to have a little trust in us. Our leaders lost faith in the American people long before the people lost faith in them.
Protect Ukraine Now

The entire structure of peace in Europe is under dire threat

By Brian Stewart

FOR MILLENNIA, the frontiers of territories that occupy the plains between the Baltic and the Black Seas have been drawn by force. In the past century, during the five-yea course of the Russian civil war, to give one example, no fewer than 11 armies—from the forces of the independent Ukrainian Republic to the White Russians to the Bolsheviks to the Poles—fought to take and hold Ukraine.

Plus ça change. “We’re deeply concerned by evidence that Russia has made plans for significant aggressive moves against Ukraine,” declared Secretary of State Anthony Blinken last December at a meeting of NATO ministers in Latvia. “The plans include efforts to destabilize Ukraine from within, as well as large scale military operations.” In other words, Russia may be planning a coup in Kyiv or expanding its invasion of Ukrainian territory—which it began by seizing and annexing the Crimean Peninsula in 2014—in short order. Such a gambit would not merely compromise Ukraine’s sovereignty and national self-determination. It would effectively bring down the curtain on the U.S.-led security order that has protected Europe since the end of World War II.

What motivates the Russian Federation’s desire to disrupt and ultimately destroy the post–Cold War status quo in this manner? The Kremlin contends that the source of today’s antagonism between itself and the West is to be found in the upending of Russia’s status and position in the post–Cold War world. At the top of the list of Russian grievances in this era has been the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to include former members of the Soviet-era Warsaw Pact.

Vladimir Putin believes that this U.S.-led march against post-Soviet Russia has impinged upon core

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Commentary
Russian interests, leaving his country “nowhere further to retreat.” Russia’s “spheres of privileged interests,” to use former Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev’s phrase, must be reclaimed. Here Ukraine presents a rare acid test since Russian leaders believe, as Putin remarked to President Bush in 2008, that Ukraine “isn’t even a country”—and certainly not a member of the hallowed Atlantic alliance.

It is Ukraine’s status as a democracy—an imperfect but competitive multiparty system—that makes it a personal affront to those in the Kremlin.

Putin has created the strange state of suspended animation in which Ukraine has existed since 2014—the sense that Europe’s largest borderland state is not quite in the clutches of the Russian bear but not at a safe remove from it, either. In a remarkable 5,000-word essay published in 2021, he laid bare his (and, if the polls are to be believed, three-quarters of the Russian people’s) deep-seated hopes—and fears—regarding Russia’s large neighbor on the Black Sea.

The subject of Putin’s missive, which was distributed to every soldier in the Russian army, was “the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” and he warned that this supposedly proud and ancient relationship was at risk. Russian-Ukrainian unity, Putin averred, has been endangered by forces within Ukraine and without, playing a “dangerous geopolitical game” by steering that nation into the Western orbit. He insisted that this disrespectful design is rupturing the natural comity between these two peoples and deploying Ukraine as a “springboard against Russia.”

In Putin’s eyes, Ukraine needs to remain in Moscow’s sphere of influence in perpetuity for Russia to reestablish itself as the principal power in Europe. From what we can tell, he has the support of the Russian people in this regard. In his book Between Two Fires, Joshua Yoffe cites polling data from 2014 according to which some 75 percent of Russians then favored a full-scale invasion of Ukraine—but Yoffe also notes that very few Russians have expressed a willingness to bear any real costs for such military adventurism. This form of doublethink, Yoffe argues, reveals the “wily” ability of rank-and-file Russian citizens to both endorse their rulers’ whims and insist that they be spared the logical and predictable consequences.

For Putin’s clique, maintaining Moscow’s grip over Ukraine is also perceived as critical to upholding the Orthodox and Slavic character of the Russian state. (After his show of force brought Crimea back into Russian hands, Putin announced to Russia’s political elite that the peninsula was properly Russian since it was the baptismal site of Vladimir the Great, the first Russian czar to adopt Orthodoxy.) The Russian Orthodox Church has repaid the compliment, offering vociferous rhetorical succor to the Putin regime. This has led Sergei Chapnin, editor of the official journal of the patriarchate, to lament that the Russian Orthodox Church is now a “Church of Empire”—“a post-Soviet civil religion providing ideological support for the Russian state.”

The notion of an independent Ukraine going its own way in spiritual affairs and even aligning with the godless West is thus anathema. But it is Ukraine’s status as a democracy—an imperfect but competitive multiparty system—that makes it a personal affront to those in the Kremlin. Putin and his ilk fear, not unjustifiably, that the external forces of liberalism will serve, explicitly and implicitly, to undercut authoritarian rule in Russia.

The Russian regime has been manifestly on guard against democratic revolutions in neighboring states since the uprisings in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004. The alarm was aggravated in 2011 by the disastrous Russian parliamentary elections, which spawned widespread protests against a fraudulent democracy that merely existed to enshrine Putin on the throne. The presence of a fledgling but thriving democratic nation (nearly a third of which are native Russian speakers) along the Russian frontier cannot help but present a rebuke to the pretensions of the Putin regime. Hence Putin’s letter—reminiscent of one penned by a jilted lover—alternating between cloying pronouncements of affection and thinly veiled threats of violence.

Of course, such threats are hardly idle. In February 2014, Ukraine’s pro-Russia president Viktor Yanukovych was overthrown in a popular uprising—the “Maidan Revolution”—after rejecting an economic agreement with the European Union, in fealty to his masters in Moscow. His successors opted for closer economic and political relations with the EU, culminating in an agreement that expressed joint support for Ukraine becoming a fully fledged member of the EU one day. In retaliation, Putin decided to flout the 1994 Budapest Memorandum guaranteeing Ukrainian sovereignty—which Russia signed in exchange for the surrender of Ukraine’s vast nuclear arsenal. Putin seized Crimea and fomented a civil conflict in the country’s southeastern region known as the Don-

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bass that continues to this day. Little has been done by Western powers to punish this bellicosity, which in one fell swoop changed Europe’s borders by force for the first time since the end of the Second World War. President Obama warned Putin in March 2014 not to move Russian troops against Ukraine. Then, within a fortnight of that warning, Russian troops launched a hybrid war and paid scarcely any penalty that might have made it regret or reverse its decision. Today, with Russian forces now massed on Ukraine’s borders, Putin stands ready to continue his depredations at a moment of his choosing—or extract nontrivial concessions from the West before standing down. 

Russia’s apologists, seeking to justify Putin’s past and future aggressions, have advanced the Kremlin line that NATO’s “encircling” of Russia is evidence of a Cold War mentality. In this view, the West’s sanctions against the Kremlin and its unceasing interference in Russia’s internal affairs somehow leave Putin no choice but to harass and invade his neighbors. According to the neo-isolationists at the Quincy Institute, a new think tank lavishly funded both by the libertarian Koch Foundation and the leftist Open Society Foundation, the West could simply resolve this prolonged standoff by treating Putin as a nuisance instead of a great-power adversary. But the truth is a good deal more complicated. Putin operates on a long-standing conviction that Russia’s chief adversary has been and remains the U.S.-led liberal order, and he will not relent until he has damaged that order beyond repair.

For more than two decades, Putin’s revanchist regime has been intent on reconstituting the Soviet Empire under the fig leaf of its vaunted “Eurasian Union.” He has made no secret of his belief that the breakup of the Soviet Union was a national tragedy, and he openly aspires to the restoration of a Greater Russia. (Even the Russian hockey team recently donned Soviet jerseys.) In the project to bring Soviet republics back under Russian sway, Ukraine seems to occupy a special position. Closely linked to Russia historically and culturally, Ukraine has nonetheless resisted the tide of authoritarianism that has swept over other former vassal states in Russia’s near-abroad. Despite endemic corruption and political dysfunction in Kyiv, Ukrainians have maintained their commitment to a free and fair electoral system. Everything we know about Putin suggests he fears that the seeds of this democratic example will spread unless it’s promptly stamped out.

The Kremlin clearly fears it will not be able to see that through without incurring steep costs, on the battlefield and in global public opinion. A costly military campaign could incite domestic dissent in Russia as well as increased support in the West for harsher sanctions against Russia and higher contributions to NATO military spending. But how costly that campaign might prove to be depends chiefly on Ukrainians and their foreign patrons. So far, Putin has not been put on notice in any way save some strong rhetoric. The Biden administration’s decisions to forgo sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which ships Russian oil directly to Western Europe, and hold multiple summits with Putin have sent the opposite signal. Such feebleness has had the perverse effect of emboldening the Kremlin to seek more concessions from the West. The White House is compounding the error by lobbying against bipartisan legislation to amend the National Defense Authorization Act to reimpose sanctions against Nord Stream 2 and to expand the number of Russian officials listed in the Global Magnitsky Act.

Ukraine is the biggest conceivable prize for Putin—something akin to what Taiwan represents for the People’s Republic of China. However many sweet words Putin may scribble or speak on behalf of Russo-Ukrainian brotherhood, his intention to reduce Ukraine’s independence and incorporate it as a satellite dictatorship in the manner of Belarus is unmistakable. It’s the prerequisite for summoning the rebirth of “historical Russia” that suffered lethal blows with the collapse of the Berlin Wall.

There are two stumbling blocks standing in

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**Puti n has made no secret of his belief that the breakup of the Soviet Union was a national tragedy, and he openly aspires to the restoration of a Greater Russia.**

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the way of that objective, however: one internal and one external. The first is that most Ukrainians have taken the measure of their truculent autocratic neighbor. Since the outbreak of hostilities, public opinion has turned swiftly against the Russian regime, and not just in western Ukraine. Across the country, young Ukrainians have been given an indelible image of Russian menace that no disinformation campaign will efface. Clear majorities of Ukrainians abhor the prospect of a Russian-dominated future, and a large number have shown themselves willing to fight to prevent it.

The second factor working against Russia’s imperial designs, of course, is the strength and coher-
To ensure the continued peace of Europe—since Putin will certainly not stop in the Donbass—greater American activism will be required.
matic push will be necessary to protect Ukraine's sovereignty. The U.S. should coordinate immediately with its strongest partners in Europe to impose more punitive sanctions than have heretofore been imposed against Russian oligarchs. Nord Stream 2 should be scrapped at once. Russia's state-owned banks and energy firms are particularly vulnerable for financial squeezing if Europe—which in this case means largely Germany—and America muster the will.

However critical these economic measures are to deterring the next bout of Russian adventurism, they will prove woefully insufficient unless supplemented by what Theodore Roosevelt called the “big stick.” To the dismay of observers who bemoan the abiding necessity of power in our world, Washington needs to provide Ukraine with lethal military assistance. Without it, Ukrainian forces stand little chance of deterring, let alone defeating, Russian-backed separatists and, potentially, Russian forces on the battlefield.

Ukraine is no pygmy. It fields one of the strongest ground forces in Europe, including 400,000 combat-ready soldiers. Nonetheless, Russia outguns it across numerous dimensions with its advanced airpower, naval power, and rocket systems. This formidable and versatile arsenal can wreak havoc on Ukrainian forces and even Ukrainian infrastructure. To mitigate these threats, Kyiv needs an arsenal of its own strong enough to deter Russian hostile action. According to Ukraine's ministry of defense, it is deficient in enhanced anti-aircraft, anti-ship, and anti-missile defense (including Patriot anti-aircraft and missile-defense systems) as well as electronic and anti-drone weaponry, along with artillery and mortar systems, reconnaissance and medical equipment, ships and boats. If its sovereignty is to mean anything, Ukraine must be provided these capabilities without delay.

This kind of assertive American leadership will draw criticism from the usual suspects who claim that any support for Ukraine is “provocative” and that President Biden would thereby be inviting war. But it’s bizarre to believe that ensuring a high price for aggression will somehow make Putin more likely to commit it. Whatever the Kremlin and the Quincy Institute might say, concerted and credible policies to deter aggression in Ukraine are not risking a war. At this hour, they may be the only means of preventing one.
Wagner and the Anti-Semitism of ‘the Ring’

The composer intended his masterpiece to offer emancipation from ‘Jewishness’

By Eric Nelson

IR ROGER SCRUTON’S passing almost exactly two years ago reminded me, sadly, of a conversation that we never had. Scruton and I did not know each other, despite the fact that we shared a number of friends and enthusiasms in common. Of the latter, the most obvious was political philosophy, but perhaps the most interesting was a preoccupation with the Ring operas of Richard Wagner. Scruton addressed this dauntingly vast subject in The Ring of Truth, which I read with admiration on its release in 2016. There was, however, one aspect of Wagner’s art about which I thought Scruton was importantly wrong: the relationship between the composer’s anti-Semitism and his music dramas, chief among them the Ring itself. I by no means took Scruton to be alone in this respect, but in his case I felt instinctively that, if I could lay out my argument for him over a glass of whiskey one evening, I would be able to bring him around.

The experience of reading his posthumously-published Wagner’s Parsifal: The Music of Redemption has now converted my instinctive feeling into a near-certainty. For in the opening pages of this new book, Scruton recognizes that “in his mature operas” Wagner meant to reject the bourgeois, liberal “world of deals and transactions”—a world characterized, as Wagner saw it, by the perverse “commodification” of human relations, rather than the longed-for “dissolving of the self in the experience of community.” This is indeed a central ideological preoccupation of the Ring. Scruton misses only the crucial fact that, for Wagner, this pathological world of bargains was essentially “Jewish.” Wagner’s anti-Semitism was therefore inextricably bound up with his critique of bourgeois liberalism. And since this distinctive style of Jew-hatred has recently returned to prominence on the political left, getting to grips with its character is, alas, no longer an imperative for deranged Wagnerians alone.

For those who have been fortunate enough to miss the past 70 years of scholarly debate about Wag-

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Wagner's anti-Semitism structures the Ring in ways far more profound than those imagined by scholars who have simply been searching for racist stereotyping within it.

...
I believe that Paul Rose’s basic intuition was sound, at least in the case of the Ring. Wagner did intend to put on stage a world that requires emancipation from its ‘Jewishness.’

denounce bourgeois society without eo ipso assailing its “Jewishness.” Perhaps partly for this reason, Rose almost immediately retreated to more familiar, if shaky ground, insisting that various characters in the music dramas—from Alberich (“the abhorrent Jewish counterpart to Wotan”) to Tannhäuser (!)—ought to be understood as crypto-Jews.

All of this made it quite easy for those who denied the presence of anti-Semitism in the operas to declare victory. Taking aim at Rose’s claim that “hatred of Jewishness is the hidden agenda of virtually all the operas,” Bryan Magee deployed biting sarcasm: “It is no good Wagner trying to slip this past Professor Rose by making no mention of it; Rose is not to be so easily fooled.” For Magee, Rose’s insistence that “the omission of any mention of Jews or Jewishness” is no bar to a diagnosis of anti-Semitism conveniently enables him to find it “in undreamt-of places, in fact in all forms of art and ideas that are not either Jewish or about Jews.” The entire project was to be dismissed as a master class in question-begging and bad faith. And dismissed it largely has been for the past three decades. Rose, for example, is not cited in either of Scruton’s books on Wagner.

But here’s the thing: I believe that Rose’s basic intuition was sound, at least in the case of the Ring. Wagner did intend to put on stage a world that requires emancipation from its “Jewishness.” There is a great deal of evidence that Rose might have offered for this claim, much of which comes from the libretto itself. Let me begin with a clue—a small detail from the second scene of Das Rheingold (the first act of the Ring operas to be scored, although the last to be written). Wotan awakes from slumber to find that Valhalla, the new home of the gods, has been completed. We learn that he has made a bargain with the giants, Fasolt and Fafner: If they build the fortress for him, he will give them the beautiful goddess Freia in payment. The bill is now due, and Wotan’s wife, Fricka, assails him for having entered into this perverse contract in the first place:

O laughingly wanton folly!
Most loveless joviality!
Had I known about your contract,
I’d have hindered such deceit;

but you mettlesome menfolk
kept us women out of the way,
so that, deaf to all entreaty, you could
calmly deal with the giants alone.
So without shame you brazenly traded away
Freia, my gracious sister,
well pleased with your Schächergewerb!
What is still sacred and precious
to your hard hearts such as yours,
when you menfolk lust after power?

The puzzle here has to do with the word I’ve left untranslated: Schächergewerb. The German word “der Schächer” is an archaic term for thief or robber, used canonically by Luther in his Bible translation to denote the thieves crucified alongside Christ. The word “Gewerbe” means trade or business, so the compound term should be rendered as something like: “thieves’ bargain.” But this makes no sense at all. Wotan is many things in this scenario, but he is no thief. And just what is a “thieves’ bargain,” anyway? English translations of the libretto most often skirt the problem by simply rendering the term as “pact,” thereby ignoring the fact that Wagner evidently has in mind a specific kind of pact. What is going on here?

The answer is that Wagner uses the term in an idiosyncratic manner, licensed by one of his habitual false etymologies (the most famous of these comes in the title of his final music drama, Parsifal, spelled with an “s” rather than the proper “z,” because he spuriously derived the character’s name from the Arabic Fal Parsi, “pure fool”). Wagner clearly has in mind the German term “der Schächer,” which denotes “hucksterism,” “sharp dealing,” or “street barter.” Grimm’s Wörterbuch of 1854 helpfully adds that the term is used “particularly of the Jewish peddling trade” (besonders von jüdischen Hausierhandel); indeed, Grimm proposes what continues to be regarded as a plausible Hebrew etymology for the term, deriving it from “sachar,” meaning trade, and suggesting that it must have entered German via Yiddish. “Der Schächer” is distinguished from “der Schächer” only by its lack of an umlaut (used to denote a now-absent “e”). Wagner is incorrectly deriving the latter from the former: “Ein Schächer” for him is one who engages in “der Schächer.” So the term Schächergewerb in fact has
a perfectly straightforward meaning in Wagner’s fanciful lexicon: it refers to a huckster’s bargain, or street barterer’s bargain.

This fact, in turn, gives us a red thread to follow. For the term “der Schacher” (itself quite rare in 19th-century German prose) was absolutely central to one of the most significant left-Hegelian pamphlets of the 1840s, and one with which Wagner was undoubtedly familiar: Karl Marx’s essay On the Jewish Question (1843). We should recall that Marx’s reply to Bruno Bauer memorably turned the familiar question of Jewish emancipation on its head. Whereas most interventions in the debate about the Judenfrage had posited an incompatibility between Judaism and liberalism (on the familiar grounds that Judaism amounted to a chauvinistic rejection of Enlightenment universalism), Marx argued instead that Judaism and liberalism were in fact a perfect match. Liberalism, on his account, is simply an expression of Judaism. Man in liberal civil society is “active as a private individual, treats other men as a means, reduces himself to a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers.” Religion in civil society is therefore “the sphere of egoism, of the bellum omnium contra omnes. It is no longer the essence of community, but the essence of division. It has become the expression of man’s separation from his community, from himself and from other men.” The notion of “the rights of man,” as understood within the liberal order, presupposes a picture of man as an “isolated monad, withdrawn into himself,” into “his private interest and private choice, and separated from the community.” The pathological focus of liberal citizens on their private, isolated needs estranges them from their fellows, whom they encounter as mere “means” to the advancement of their own interests. The result is the distinctive commodification of human life that Marx associates with the bourgeois, liberal order.

But this fact about the liberal state, for Marx, is to be explained as a manifestation of its essential “Jewishness.” The “secular basis of Judaism,” Marx argues, is “practical need, self-interest. What is the worldly cult of the Jew? Bargaining [Der Schacher]. What is his worldly god? Money.” The degeneration of “civil society” into a “sphere of egoism” is to be explained as a “Judaizing” of society, from which it follows that “emancipation from bargaining [der Schacher] and money, consequently from practical, real Judaism, would be the self-emancipation of our era,” or, as he also puts it, “the emancipation of society from Judaism” (die Emazipation der Gesellschaft von Juden-tum). The key term in this argument, as we can see, is “der Schacher.” Judaism, for Marx, takes the “bargain” as its paradigmatic form of encounter between agents, both divine and human. The Jew approaches God as an “egoist” aiming to satisfy “practical needs”; he promises obedience to an unfounded, superficial law in return for the satisfaction of those needs and tries to get the best deal possible from the party opposite—often using the “cunning” of “Jewish Jesuitism” to fin loopholes in the law he purports to honor. “The bill of exchange,” as Marx puts it, “is the real god of the Jew. His god is only an illusory bill of exchange.” The liberal contractarian tradition is, in turn, merely the application of this Jewish “bargain” mentality to the relationship between citizens; each approaches the other as an “egoist” trying to extract the best possible terms from his fellows. Marx’s conclusion is that “an organization of society which would abolish the preconditions for bargaining, and therefore the possibility of bargaining, would make the Jew impossible.”

When Marx associates the “bargain” mentality with Judaism, he thus primarily has in mind an egoistic fetishism of needs that reduces both the self and other people to “means,” rather than ends. Jews particularly adore money, on this account, because it is the efficient medium through which human beings (particularly their labor) can be commodified and exchanged. At the limit, Marx explains, “the species-relation itself, the relation between man and woman, etc., becomes an object of trade! The woman is bought and sold.”

This is precisely what is happening in scene II of Das Rheingold. Wotan, who “rules only by contracts” and presides over a legalistic order of self-interest, has so objectified his own sister-in-law that he has bartered her to the giants in return for a house. He has engaged in what we are now entitled to translate as “Jewish barter.” And as he is reminded of this heinous fact, the telltale descending notes of the “contract” or “spear” motif appear darkly in the strings (recall that the contracts, or treaties, that undergird the order of the gods are said to be inscribed on Wotan’s spear).
Since the audience has already watched Scene I, it knows perfectly well that Alberich's original sin was merely to take Wotan's own logic a step further: The dwarf had renounced love in favor of power by stealing the Rheingold. He would eventually use his new wealth to purchase a mate, with whom he would father a child (Hagen) by rape.

This kind of commodification of women is itself a central thematic preoccupation of the Ring, and virtually every time the subject is broached, Wagner returns tellingly to his language of “der Schacher.” Thus, in Act I, Scene 3 of Die Walküre, Sieglinde explains to Siegmund that a mysterious stranger appeared on her unhappy wedding day:

The men from his clan
sat here in the hall,
as guests at Hunding's wedding:
he chose a woman [i.e., Sieglinde herself],
unasked,
whom low barterers [Schächer] gave him as his wife.
Sadly I sat there
while they were drinking;
a stranger then came in.

My translation of “Schächer” as “low barterers” here is, once again, a departure from the standard English versions of the libretto, which simply don't know what to do with the word. Obviously, the men who have given Sieglinde in marriage to Hunding are only with the greatest awkwardness to be described as “robbers” or “thieves.” The well-known Jameson version fudges by calling them “miscreants.” But this again serves to efface the move that Wagner is making: On his account, those who traded Sieglinde to Hunding were engaged in “der Schacher,” the paradigmatically Jewish form of human commodification.

We should also recall that, at this point in the scene, Sigemund has only just finished explaining to Hunding and Sieglinde that he is on the run because he came to the aid of a “sorrowful child” whose “kinsmen sought to bind her, without love, to a man in wedlock.” These same “kinsmen”—who, of course, turn out to be Hunding’s own—are now hot on Siegmund’s trail. He is thus introduced to the audience from the first as the great enemy of “Der Schacher,” the hero who wishes to end the reign of contracts and bargains.

Once we’ve taken all of this on board and acknowledged that much of the Ring is, in essence, On the Jewish Question set to music, we will be in a position to recognize other straightforward thematic borrowings from Marx’s essay. We have already seen, for instance, that Marx associated Judaism with casuistic bad faith. The Jew, on this account, promises to uphold a law that is arbitrary and alienating, at odds with his proper human purposes, or “species being” (a concept the young Marx took from Feuerbach). As a result, he constantly finds himself thwarted by the very law to which he is bound, and he responds by cultivating a “Jewish Jesuitism… the chief art of which consists in the cunning circumvention of these laws.” The canonical embodiment of this charge in the anti-Semitic imagination was always the Shabbos goy, the Gentile who performs what are, for Jews, forbidden activities on the Sabbath. A Jew is, for instance, barred by the law from kindling a lamp on the Sabbath, but he doesn’t wish to exist in darkness—so he might rely on a Gentile who is not bound by the law in question to light the lamp for him. But he may not explicitly instruct or ask the Gentile to do so. This practice raises a whole set of stereotypically “rabbinic” questions about complicity: What hints, assistance, or encouragement is the Jew permitted to offer to the non-Jew in question, without converting the latter’s act into his own? When, if at all, is he permitted to pay the non-Jew for his labor? And so on.

This aspect of the Young Hegelian attack on Jewishness is crucial to the narrative structure of the Ring. In Das Rheingold, it is personified by Loge, the fire god who is also the great authority on loopholes. When Wotan tries to welch on his bargain with the giants, Fasolt reminds him that he is stuck. “Honor your contracts,” he warns Wotan, “for what you are, you are only though contracts!” The legal order that undergirds Wotan’s reign requires the keeping of contracts, but the perverse consequence is that Wotan must treat Freia as chattel (and, incidentally, die himself, when deprived of her life-giving apples). He therefore seeks a way out, a maneuver whereby he can subvert the contract without actually violating it—and for this he calls on Loge, essentially his shady attorney.
Richard Wagner’s embrace of Marx’s anti-Jewish paradigm in the Ring is quite comprehensive, and in this respect the music dramas simply echo the thrust of his political prose.

Where simple truth serves,
I ask for help from no man.
But, to turn to advantage an enemy's grudge
is a lesson that only guile and cunning can teach,
of the kind that Loge slyly employs.
He who counselled me on this contract
promised to ransom Freia:
on him I now rely.

The order of the law requires the cultivation of “guile and cunning” (Schlauheit und List) and the practice of gamesmanship. But this casuistry is, for Wagner, always unavailing. Loge’s proposed solution to the dilemma—that Wotan should acquire the Rhinegold and Alberich’s ring and then get the giants to accept them as a substitute for Freia—is what sets in motion the destruction of the order of the gods that comes finally in Götterdämmerung.

This first bit of casuistry gives rise to a momentous second one in Die Walküre. Wotan has now traded the ring to the giants, one of whom (Fafner) has killed his brother and turned himself into a giant dragon, keeping watch over his quarry. Wotan knows that the ring must be returned to the Rhine if the gods are to be saved, but his contract with Fafner stands between him and salvation: “The bargain I have made forbids me to strike him…. I who am Lord through contracts am now a slave to them.” He therefore concocts a new plan: He will father a son (Siegmund) with a mortal woman, who will not be bound by the laws of the gods (sich löse vom Göttergesetz), and this free man, uninstructed, will slay Fafner and reclaim the ring for him. He raises the boy under the guise of the wolf-man, Wälse, and leaves behind a sword for him (Nothung), which Siegmund will find “in his hour of greatest need.” He therefore concocts a new plan: He will father a son (Siegmund) with a mortal woman, who will not be bound by the laws of the gods (sich löse vom Göttergesetz), and this free man, uninstructed, will slay Fafner and reclaim the ring for him. He raises the boy under the guise of the wolf-man, Wälse, and leaves behind a sword for him (Nothung), which Siegmund will find “in his hour of greatest need.” But Fricka devastatingly exposes the bad faith of this maneuver during her long debate with Wotan in Act II. Wotan is made to acknowledge that by raising and nurturing Siegmund and supplying him with his weapon, he has become complicit in everything that has occurred and whatever is to follow. His pretense that Siegmund is “a hero I never helped with my counsel, a stranger to the god, free from his grace, unaware, free from command” collapses, and he is forced to decree Siegmund’s death in battle (punishment for the latter’s having had intercourse with the legal spouse of another man, who also happens to be his own sister). Once again, “Jewish Jesuitism” is shown to end in utter failure.

Wagner’s embrace of Marx’s anti-Jewish paradigm in the Ring is therefore quite comprehensive, and in this respect the music dramas simply echo the thrust of his political prose. In his notorious essay Jewishness in Music (1850), written while he was composing the Ring libretto, Wagner quotes Marx almost word-for-word when he dismisses the question of Jewish emancipation as a red herring: “According to the present constitution of this world, the Jew in truth is already more than emancipated: he rules, and will rule, so long as Money remains the power before which all our doings and our dealings lose their force.” What European bourgeois civilization requires is, rather, “emancipation from the yoke of Judaism” (die Emanzipation von dem Drucke des Judentums). Thirty years later, Wagner’s perspective on the subject remained unchanged. In his often-misunderstood essay Know Thyself (1881), this Young Hegelian assault on Jewishness becomes, paradoxically enough, part of an argument against the overenthusiastic scapegoating of Jews for the ills of liberal capitalism. Yes, Wagner writes, “the Nibelung’s fateful ring has become a stock portfolio,” and Europe’s “vanished [Christian] faith is now replaced by ‘Credit,’ that fiction of our mutual honesty kept upright by the most elaborate safeguards against loss and trickery.” But it is a mistake “to lay all the blame for this on the Jews.” To be sure, “they are virtuos i in an art [money-making] at which we but bungle.” But the nefarious "creation of money out of nothing was invented by our Civilization itself. If the Jews are blamable for that, it is because our entire civilization is a barbaric-Jewish concoction [ein barbarisch-judaistisches Gemisch].” It is, in other words, chiefly Europeans who are to blame for the ills of bourgeois Europe, precisely because they have allowed themselves to become Judaized—thus ensuring, as Wagner put it in a March 1878 article for the Bayreuther Blätter, “the victory of the modern Jew-world” (der Siege der modernen Judenwelt). The real trouble, as in the Ring, is “Jewishness” rather than the Jews themselves. But the latter always remain the great embodiments and agents of the former.
I DESCRIBED MYSELF at the outset as one who is obsessively preoccupied by the music dramas of Richard Wagner. I could have added with equal honesty that I love them, at least as much as Roger Scruton did. Like him, I follow the Ring cycle around the world (or at least I did before the plague). But unlike him, I am a Jew. Jewish Wagnerism has of course long been regarded by many as a pathology, even a mental illness. If it is, I am consoled by the fact that my fellow sufferers have included the likes of Hermann Levi, Gustav Mahler, Arnold Schoenberg, George Gershwin, and, of course, Theodor Herzl, who selected the Tannhäuser overture to open the 1898 Zionist Congress in Basel. And this is to say nothing of the great modern Jewish interpreters of Wagner’s music, such as Daniel Barenboim, James Levine, and Kirill Petrenko. But none of these Jewish Wagnerites believed that the Ring was itself a deeply anti-Semitic artwork. I do believe this. Where should that fact leave me, or indeed us, if I have persuaded you? What are the ethics of clear-eyed Wagnerism?

The short answer, I think, is that Wagner’s music requires us to hold different thoughts in our minds at the same time—or, in other words, to grow up. I wish I could deny the anti-Semitic thematic structure of the Ring, or, failing that, simply reach the conclusion that the music dramas themselves aren’t any good (a noted Jewish anti-Wagnerite, Thomas Adès, recently referred to Wagner’s music as “fungal”). But I can do neither. The Ring, for me, is a partly loathsome work of transcendent genius. Odi et amo, as Catullus wrote: I hate and love it at the same time. I watch the cycle in unending wonder mixed with contempt. And learning to tolerate that sort of dissonance—with no Liebestod at the end to resolve it, even after 17 hours!—is, it seems to me, a requirement of any serious engagement with life as well as art.

But Wagner’s oeuvre also demands something else of us: It insists, in the here and now, that we reckon honestly with the character of the distinctive kind of anti-Semitism that he did so much to promote. During the most recent UK general-election campaign, I said to a British friend that I could not believe that roughly half his country’s population was prepared to elect as prime minister someone who was either a virulent anti-Semite or, if not, then certainly the best impersonator of one to appear on the European political stage since the war. My friend, though not at all a Corbyn supporter, replied, “No, no. Jeremy Corbyn isn’t an anti-Semite; he’s a Trot!” Well, Richard Wagner—despite his subsequent appropriation by the fascist right—was the closest thing to a Trot that 19th-century Europe was capable of producing. He conceived the Ring during the fateful years leading up to and away from 1848 and in some ways kept faith with the ideology of revolution even after his turn to political quietism in later life. Wagner, in short, arrived at his anti-Semitic worldview not despite his leftism, but because of it, and he accordingly dressed it in the distinctive garb of humanist universalism. The redemption of the fallen liberal, capitalist world was, for him as well as Marx, nothing more or less than its emancipation from Jewishness. To those who are now so enthusiastically renewing this call for emancipation, we should say in the words of the Master: Erkenne dich selbst, “Know thyself!”

Wagner, in short, arrived at his anti-Semitic worldview not despite his leftism, but because of it, and he accordingly dressed it in the distinctive garb of humanist universalism.
Who Will Control the Machines?

The Age of AI: And Our Human Future
By Henry A. Kissinger, Eric Schmidt, and Daniel Huttenlocher
Little, Brown and Company, 272 pages

Reviewed by Arthur Herman

The Age of AI: And Our Human Future should have been a better book than it is. Given the brilliance and reputations of its co-authors, it should have been a compelling look at the capabilities of artificial intelligence, today and in the future. It should have been a cohesive account of what those capabilities reveal about the limitations of both humans and machines in the coming century. Above all, two leading experts on U.S.–China relations, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and former Google CEO Eric Schmidt, should have weighed in on how the U.S. can regain its lead versus Beijing in AI technology, which Schmidt has conceded elsewhere we are in danger of losing.

Instead, bringing these two minds together results in what I can only describe as dysergy, instead of synergy. MIT dean Daniel Huttenlocher must have found himself in a tough spot trying to negotiate between two powerful personalities pushing distinct, and ultimately conflicting, visions. The result is a book that gives us a greatly overrated view of the possibility of intelligent machines and a very cramped view of humanity—while remaining virtually mute on the real threat to our human future, which is not AI but China.

Still, The Age of AI does do an important service in dispelling some of the more overheated fears about what artificial intelligence can and will do to expand the capacity of computers to mimic and even exceed the capabilities of humans—a future that some have greeted with alarm (Max Tegmark, Nick Bostrom), and some with enthusiasm (Ray Kurzweil, Robin Hanson).

Just to clarify: Artificial intelligence is the branch of computer

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science that deals with the simulation of intelligent, i.e., human-like, behavior in computers—such as planning activities, moving around in a physical environment, recognizing objects and sounds, speaking, translating, etc. Machine learning (ML) is the subset of AI that uses algorithms to curate data, learn from it, and make a determination or prediction about certain things or events. AI’s capabilities are built on machine learning. It uses those determinations to solve problems faster and more efficiently than human beings can, such as finding the winning move in a chess game or identifying which chemical molecules can create a new antibiotic (which MIT researchers did in 2020, naming it halicin after the computer HAL in 2001: A Space Odyssey).

The authors point to AI’s capacity for startling insights, “such as identifying drug candidates and [devising] new strategies for winning games” as signposts toward a new future both for computers and human beings. But they also point out that despite AI’s seemingly daunting capabilities, it’s still left “to humans to divine their significance and, if prudent, integrate those insights into existing bodies of knowledge.”

In addition, “AI cannot reflect upon what it discovers.” This means “the significance of its actions is up to humans to decide,” which leaves a wide space for AI’s human operators to exercise control, “regulate and monitor the technology.”

AI and ML programs also make mistakes. Visual-recognition applications are especially tricky; Google Photos once labeled a picture of a gorilla as an African American, while another identified a school bus as an ostrich. Operators can teach the machine not to make the same mistake; that’s why it’s called machine learning. (Google’s solution was to take pictures of gorillas out of the dataset.) But AI is not self-correcting. “The algorithms, training data, and objectives for machine learning are determined by the people developing and training the AI, thus they reflect those people’s values, motivations, goals, and judgments,” the authors write. “Even as machine-learning technologies become more sophisticated, these limitations will persist.”

All this hardly sounds like Terminator-style machines replacing humans and taking over the world. The mood darkens, however, when the authors get to Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), a supposed point in time when machines will be able to equal or even exceed the intelligence capacity of humans—or possibly unite themselves into a single super AGI beyond the capability of any human being to control or even understand. They predict that “AI will progress at least as fast as computing power has, yielding a million-fold increase in fifteen to twenty years. Such progress will allow the creation of neural networks that, in scale, are equal to the human brain.”

Equal in scale, maybe. But in capability? That’s a much bigger leap, which looks more and more impossible the more we know about how AI and ML really work.

All ML, the workhorse of AI, is driven by a computer’s ability to recognize patterns in sets of noisy data—whether those data consist of sounds, images, electrical pulses, airline passenger manifests, or financial transactions. The mathematical representation of these data is called a tensor. As long as data can be converted into a tensor, it’s ready for ML and its more sophisticated cousin, Deep Learning. Deep Learning builds algorithms inspired by the structure and function of the brain’s neural network for the purpose of constructing a predictive model. It does so by learning from other testing datasets that correct and validate its initial model.

What operators end up with is a prediction curve based on the recognition of past patterns (e.g., given the pervasiveness of X with Y in the past, we can expect XY to appear again in the future). The more data, the better the model: Patterns that may be undetectable in tens of thousands of examples can suddenly be obvious in the millionth or ten millionth example. AI pioneer Oren Etzioni, who is cited with approval by our authors, says that machine learning creates high-capacity statistical models. Another AI scientist, Yoshua Bengio, has explained that deep-learning networks “tend to learn statistical regularities in the dataset rather than higher-level abstract concepts.”

This is not thinking, or anything
remotely like it. And yet the authors proceed as if it were, concluding: “Whether we consider it a tool, a partner, or a rival, [AI] will alter our experience as reasoning beings and permanently change our relationship with reality.” They even assert that AI “hastens dynamics that erode human reason as we have come to understand it.”

This is because the authors have embraced a distorted view of the primacy of reason in human affairs. They quote French and German thinkers such as Descartes, Kant, and Montesquieu, but not figure from the Scottish Enlightenment such as Adam Smith and David Hume—who understood that our passions and moral sentiments are far more important to our lives as human beings than reason alone. It was Hume who asserted that “reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions”—an inconvenient quotation that appears nowhere in this book. Nor do they mention the traditional Judeo-Christian view that “the divine light of reason” (to quote Augustine) may support but hardly defines what makes us truly human, namely, our soul.

In the end, what definitively distinguishes us from machines isn’t our intelligence but our subjective states of consciousness, the origins of which neuroscientists are just beginning to understand. This is why the neuroscientist Anil Seth’s new book, Being You, dismisses fears that AGI is just around the corner. Those fears, he points out, rest on the false assumption that consciousness and intelligence are intimately linked and “that consciousness will just come along for the ride.”

Instead, the life of the human mind or consciousness proceeds on the basis of informed guesses punctuated by intuitive leaps—“Eureka” moments are not just crucial for major scientific discoveries but for everyday life (“I saw this young woman through the shop window, and I just had to meet her”). Logical reasoning and the patterns of the past are of no help here. After all, I’ve seen plenty of young women through shop windows before, but something made me choose that one (and then make her my wife a year and a half later).

Compared with these moments, the workings of AI/ML will always seem mechanical and plodding. As the Dutch computer and systems scientist Edsger Dijkstra puts it, “the question of whether machines can think is about as relevant as the question of whether submarines can swim.” Yet because machine intelligence can mimic human intelligence, people fantasize that it somehow threatens human intelligence itself. It’s true that operators are now writing algorithms that come without an explanation facility for the user, while the reasons why a deep neural network does what it does can be hard to unravel. It’s sometimes impossible to ask the computer how it arrived at a particular conclusion—especially if the conclusion is wrong (e.g., mistaking a picture of a bus for an ostrich). Those are developments that should give pause to anyone pause, not just computer scientists, given the extent to which we are relying on these machines. But these problems arise because AI/ML is getting more complicated and sophisticated, not because it has suddenly moved to a new and higher qualitative level of thinking. And when AI shifts from one endeavor to another, it turns out that AI trained to play chess can’t play Go without further programming, so its performance level quickly sinks—unlike with humans, who can make those shifts all the time.

The real breakthrough will come when operators figure out how to install their own general intuitive sense into their machines. So far, no one has figured out how to do that. There is no indication anyone ever will.

Unfortunately, The Age of AI’s misleading view of the role of reason in history and human affairs leads to an even more misleading—one might even say dangerous—view of the future. Here the authors turn to a bad historical analogy when they compare the threat of AI and AI-driven weapons in the 21st century to the threat of nuclear weapons in the 20th. They even suggest the threat could be worse, because “AI’s capacity for autonomy and separate logic generates a layer of incalculability” that can be applied to all existing weapon systems, including nuclear weapons, and because “delegation of critical decisions to ma-
chines may grow inevitable,” including decisions affecting life and death that may be “opaque to human reason.” From this perspective, the rise of SkyNet (in the Terminator movies) and HAL doesn’t seem so far-fetched after all. Even worse, unlike today’s existing international agreements concerning the use and proliferation of nuclear weapons, “efforts to conceptualize a cyber balance of power” and AI nonproliferation are “in their infancy, if that.”

Relying on the analogy of nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence as a way to understand the threat that AI may pose in the wrong hands is not surprising, given Kissinger’s lifelong interest and expertise in the subject. But AI is not a discrete technology, as nuclear weapons were. Unlike nuclear weapons, AI and ML have already become all-pervasive and are in widespread use. Thanks to user-friendly AI frameworks such as Orange and SageMaker, building your own AI application has become relatively easy, while the cloud gives ordinary users direct access to top-rank hardware. At the same time, the proliferation of open-source data, from weather and census data to marketing surveys and university research, provides endless grist for the thousands of AI mills already out there.

In fact, the more data the model can digest, the better it gets. That’s why in the age of AI, access to data will become the decisive instrument for exercising command over AI/ML’s future, whether in financial markets or on the battlefield. And that’s why establishing control over access to the avalanche of data that will come through 5G wireless technology is as important as control over AI itself.

The one country that understands this is China.

The U.S. has been the center of AI research going back to the 1950s. The danger is that we are losing that leadership to a country that has no compunctions about the dark side of ML and AI.

President Xi Jinping has set aside $150 billion to make China the first AI-driven nation, which includes building a massive police-surveillance apparatus powered by Big Data and artificial intelligence. Trains in China now require national IDs to buy tickets, which allows the government to block human-rights activists or anti-corruption journalists from traveling. In Xinjiang Province, home of China’s oppressed Uyghur Muslim minority, the government uses AI-sifted Big Data and facial recognition to scrutinize anyone entering a mosque or even a shopping mall, thanks to the thousands of checkpoints requiring a national ID check-in.

Even more, when Google’s Deep Mind employed AI to defeat a world-class human champion at Go, China’s national game, in 2017, the People’s Liberation Army realized that AI had the potential to give it an insurmountable edge on the battlefield—including enhanced command-and-control functions, hypersonics, building swarm technology for thousands of UAVs, as well as object- and facial-recognition targeting software and AI-enabled cyber deterrence. By law, virtually all the work that Chinese companies do in AI research and development is also available to the Chinese military and intelligence services to shape their future force posture—while Chinese telecom equipment giant Huawei will make sure that the 5G networks it builds around the world will provide access to endless supplies of data to make the Chinese AI juggernaut stronger and better.

The authors of The Age of AI are strangely muted about China. This is odd, since Kissinger has been an expert on China going back to his historic visit in 1971, and, as chair of the U.S. National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, Eric Schmidt has publicly warned that China is poised to replace the U.S. as the world’s “AI superpower” and that the U.S. “is not prepared to defend or compete in the AI era.”

The authors admit that Chinese digital technology such as AI and digital platforms such as TikTok are being used as extensions of Beijing’s policy objectives, including its military. But they also insist that the private sector’s relationship with the Chinese Communist Party is “complex and varied in practice”—a variability that eludes other Western Chinese observers. Certainly President Xi and his cohorts have no qualms about the ethics of proliferating AI research and development, which is why the authors’ desire to look for ways to integrate restraints on AI “into a responsible pattern of international relations” seems not only quaint but out of date. We aren’t going to get this djinn back in its bottle, and their proposal of handing the future of AI over to “the leadership of a small group of respected figure from the highest levels of government, business, and academia” seems like the worst of all possible solutions.

For whatever reasons, the authors prefer to write about China as if we were all facing the same dilemmas about AI, and we could all ultimately agree on how to address them. The truth is, we can’t. Instead, the U.S. must embrace the AI arms race with China and seize the dual-use advantages AI offers, including helping to build future quantum computers that can break every existing public encryption system. (Quantum is the one technology that bears any comparison to the destructive potential of nuclear weapons.)
Two undeniable truths stand out at the end of this journey. The first is that nuclear nonproliferation worked (more or less) because the U.S. dominated the technology from the start and was able to force other countries, including Russia and China, to abide by the rules or face consequences. The same will be true of AI nonproliferation, if such a project is even possible.

The second is that the real check on the abuse of AI/ML isn’t international agreements but the moral judgments of the builders and operators. Those judgments need to be shaped by Western values, including the belief in protecting freedom as a matter of national security. Otherwise, “the values, motivations, goals, and judgments” that drive AI in the 21st century will be those of the Chinese Communist Party, while we dither about who should sit next to the president of Harvard on an AI oversight commission.

All that said, there is no doubt that the Age of AI will be a foundational document in any debate and discussion about where this technology will take us. But like the current state of AI itself, it’s hardly the final word on the subject—and hardly the key to the future it wants to be.

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**The True Core**

*Rescuing Socrates: How the Great Books Changed My Life and Why They Matter for a New Generation*

**By Roosevelt Montás**

Princeton University Press, 238 pages

Reviewed by Naomi Schaefer Riley

Roosevelt Montás seems like a man from another era. Having emigrated from the Dominican Republic to New York City in 1985 at the age of 12, Montás actually remembers the first time running water came to his small village and when his community shared one telephone. He experienced life with no stove, no refrigerator, and no television. Maybe it’s not surprising, then, that the message of Montás’s new book, *Rescuing Socrates*, also seems to hail from another time.

Montás, who served as the director of Columbia’s Center for the Core Curriculum for a decade, tries to explain why the texts of Western Civilization are still relevant. He believes that higher education is undergoing a crisis, albeit not a completely new one. He writes: “Liberal education has always been a hard sell. People fortunate enough to have had it often describe it as a life-altering experience. But those who haven’t had it don’t usually feel that their lives are less rich or less fulfilling or lacking it. With higher education increasingly seen in transactional terms—with students paying exorbitant amounts of money to gain a leg up in a fiercely competitive environment—it’s easy to see how liberal arts education might be regarded as a waste of time.”

The problem is worse than that now. First, today’s most fortunate students are rarely getting an actual liberal arts education. Second, when that education is offered to them, they spend a lot of time protesting its bias and its irrelevance. And finally, the students who are not fortunate enough to have experienced what’s popularly thought of as liberal education often feel as if they’re the only sane ones left in the country.

Montás recounts his own inspiring encounters with four of the authors taught in the Core program at Columbia—Plato, Augustine, Freud, and Gandhi. He shows how each one not only made him a more educated person but helped him answer the question: What is the good life? This is a question he has helped hundreds of young people think about by means of a program in which his university brings underprivileged students to campus over a summer to read and discuss these texts. “Every year, I witness Socrates bringing students to serious contemplation of the ultimately existential issues his philosophy demands we grapple with,” he writes. “My students from low-income households do not take this sort of thinking to be the exclusive privilege of a social elite. In fact, they find in it a vision of dignity and excellence that is not constrained by material limitations.”

But Montás himself came to this project with certain advantages, if not material ones. For one thing, he was from an immigrant family in which doing well in school and listening to authority figures were
values reinforced at home. Even at a large urban public school, he had teachers who took a particular interest in developing his curiosity. And he was not weighed down by the idea that he was a victim because of his racial or economic background. He also credits his religious upbringing with putting him in the correct frame of mind for this kind of learning.

Reading Socrates, “what I was gleaning from the text was not about Ancient Greece or about philosophy, but about how I was to live my life,” he says. “I was reading Socrates the same way I was reading the Bible.” This is probably one of the less remarked upon aspects of why so many students are unprepared for liberal education. While their professors are eagerly awaiting the opportunity to talk them out of—or mock—traditional religious belief, fewer and fewer students are even exposed to its basic tenets.

But Montás was able to make this leap: “As a young person trying to understand what it meant to be who I was and to be where I was, I found Plato a genuine affirmation of my identity.” What an extraordinary sentiment to hear today. But Montás insists, “It was not my identity as a Dominican immigrant that Socrates affirmed, but something more fundamental, an identity that cut me loose from the assumptions of my peers at Columbia as much as it did from the expectations of my Dominican community.”

Montás took Plato personally: “I took to heart Socrates’s innocent and saccharine admonitions. They pointed toward what felt like the most worthwhile way of living for me. Here was a sort of identity that felt true to my deepest self. Here was the life of the mind.”

It is this feeling that the great philosophers of the West are speaking to him directly that leads him to take offense when people assume that because he is an academic, he “must be the resident expert on Latino Studies.” In fact, he tells them, “no, my doctoral work was on the New England Transcendentalists and the abolitionist movement.”

Montás is not oblivious to the reasons that core curricula cannot be maintained in most modern universities. “The tendency is to focus on competencies rather than on knowledge and on ways of knowing rather than things to be known,” he writes. Some of this is clearly laziness. College professors, even if they believe that there are important things students should know, don’t want to be in the business of defending such a position. Especially these days, suggesting that all students read Plato or Augustine could get you branded a racist. He describes speaking to college presidents who vigorously defend their decision to have no requirements at all. “Why not let students pick for themselves what they find most relevant or appealing?” they ask.

But as someone who began as an outsider to American culture and the ideas of Western Civilization, Montás finds these arguments ingenuous at best and dangerous to the future of our republic, at worst. “The claim that in today’s America there is no sufficiently shared intellectual and cultural heritage to justify common study is disproven by the fact that public life is transacted through a range of shared institutions, norms, categories, and values in which we all participate and in which we all have a stake,” he says. This argument, which echoes E.D. Hirsh’s justification for a core curriculum in the elementary and secondary grades, is often dismissed by today’s elites. They complain on the one hand about all of the cultural knowledge that elites seem to possess but that the less advantaged do not—as David Brooks did when he wrote a column about taking a friend with only a high-school degree to lunch only to realize that she didn’t understand the ingredients on the menu at the gourmet sandwich shop. But why are elites unwilling to acknowledge all of the history and literature and philosophy we could be giving them from an early age?

Montás emphasizes that these institutions and norms make up our “history that, though riddled with debate, constitutes our shared heritage.” He goes on: “My being a brown immigrant from the Dominican Republic does not make the Constitution less relevant to me than it is to my wife, a white woman born in rural Michigan.”

Indeed, Montás argues that it is his knowledge of the values of Western Civilization and the ideas developed in it that are “the most powerful tool we have to subvert the hierarchies of social privilege that keep those who are down, down.” He also notes that “contemporary notions like human rights, democracy, gender equality, scientific objectivity, the free market, equality before the law, and many others cannot be adequately accounted for without studying the ‘Western tradition.’”

Of course, Montás is right about this, but perhaps it says something about our fractured intellectual culture that I wonder who the intended audience for these words are. Will any student currently in our higher-education system read them and question whether in fact dead white men have some responsibility for these ideas or consider that those men have relevance in our debates today? Will any faculty members? I hope so, but I’m starting to doubt it. Perhaps students will see Montás’s biography, be willing to humor him, and start this intellectual journey for themselves. But it is also easy to see how he will be dismissed as some kind of tool of the white-su-
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premacist power structure.

Montás offers suggestions for how these Core text programs can revitalize the humanities and universities more generally. But he acknowledges that so many of the problems are created by the structure and incentives of universities themselves. Rewarding academic publication and overspecialization does not create a class of professors who want to teach a course that goes from Plato to Martin Luther King Jr. And few professors want to sacrifice their own career either to teach these introductory courses or to defend the need for them.

But at least there is Roosevelt Montás, an Ivy League professor who is willing to write, “I count the chance of becoming an American as among the greatest fortunes of my life.” Not just because of the freedom or the economic opportunity, he writes. But because he has the chance to “take part in the collective self-governance of the most powerful nation in the world.” One can only hope that Rescuing Socrates rescues others as well.

American Comics: A History
By Jeremy Dauber
W.W. Norton & Company, 592 pages

Reviewed by Sonny Bunch

AMERICAN culture is now dominated by the influence of the world of comic books and their derivates. Five of the six highest-grossing films of the year have at least some relationship to Marvel Comics. Netflix, the biggest streaming company in the world, bought out rights to creator Mark Millar’s Millarworld for a deal in the low-to-mid eight figures. The second-largest streaming company, Disney+, is staking its future in part on Marvel Cinematic Universe–related shows such as Hawkeye, Loki, WandaVision, and What If? The biggest hit on Amazon’s Prime Video service, arguably, has been its deconstruction of superheroics, The Boys. The most audacious Warner Bros. gambit might have been putting its theatrical lineup (including the $185-million-budgeted DC property The Suicide Squad) in theaters and on HBO Max simultaneously; a close second was committing an additional $70 million to complete Zack Snyder’s Justice League, which was dumped in theaters in 2017 following a series of disastrous reshoots by Joss Whedon.

We live in a world of comic books, and we have for some time. But as Jeremy Dauber makes abundantly clear in American Comics: A History, comic books—particularly the brand of spandexed and masked and muscled comic books favored by the big two, Marvel and DC—are only a small part of the story of comics in general, even comic books in particular. Cartoons and comic strips have a long history; even Martin Luther dabbled in the form, highlighting the wickedness of the papacy by comparing Jesus’s goodness with papal devilry. During the Civil War, “the visual equivalent[s] of Uncle Tom’s Cabin,” Dauber writes, “were crucial to the galvanization of political morale essential for the totalizing Civil War.” Lincoln later claimed that pioneering anti-Tammany Hall cartoonist Thomas Nast “has been our best recruiting sergeant’; Grant claimed he ‘did as much as any one man to preserve the union.’”

It was the newspaper comic strip that cemented the medium. Strips would become immensely popular—and profitable for the artists behind them, who, after some legal wrangling, were granted ownership of their characters and ideas by the courts. More or less.

The big question, as always, was: Won’t someone please think of the children? Dauber recounts that in 1908, “the president of the National Association of Newspaper Circulation Managers wrote, ‘The crude coloring, slap-dash drawing, and very cheap and obvious funniness of the comic supplement cannot fail to debase the taste of readers and render them to a certain extent incapable of appreciating the fine forms of art.’” It’s a vaguely ironic point, given that a decade or so earlier, Joseph Pulitzer, whose papers inaugurated the form, had scrapped plans to run great works of Western art with a new color press in favor of a funnies supplement on Sundays aimed at kids.

The concern about the moral corruption of children would wax and
wane as comic strips were collected into books and sold, first as newspaper supplements and then on their own. After a dime sticker was slapped on some excess copies that then sold out on newsstands, it was clear that there was business to be done in this regard. By the late 1930s, the enormous popularity of Superman, and then the Hitler-socking Captain America, would spin the industry toward superheroes; when the books were included with care kits sent to GIs, the industry aged up a bit.

The question of who constitutes the intended audience for comic books is, perhaps, the biggest running story in the controversies that have surrounded them over the past 80 years. In an attempt to retain audiences as they aged out of Clark Kent and Lois Lane’s misadventures, savvy publishers in the 1940s leaned into horror and crime comics. But the severed heads and dripping gore and wives repaying cheating hubbies with murder made these pulpy products easy targets for crusaders such as Frederic Wertham, the psychiatrist who almost single-handedly brought down the industry through the publication of his famous book, *The Seduction of the Innocent*.

Comics would survive a Freudian quack who couldn’t handle the fact that sometimes a Robin is just a sidekick. Indeed, boom times were just around the corner. But the question remained: Who, exactly, were comics for? Marvel’s run of books in the 1960s, including *Fantastic Four*, *Spider-Man*, and *The Uncanny X-Men*—stewarded by Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Steve Ditko—found a college-aged and educated audience almost by accident, giving the industry new cachet and acclaim, as well as thematic concerns to toy with, like racism and drug abuse. But it was the so-called comix underground where the boundaries would be pushed furthest.

Counterculture and subculture artists such as Robert Crumb and Denis Kitchen experimented with more adult subject matter—both in terms of language and the graphic depiction of genitalia. (Or maybe “adult”; there’s something perpetually adolescent about the nose-thumbing nature of it all.) Crumb would almost immediately come under fire then and throughout the years for cartoons that were clearly intended to satirize racism and sexism yet came across as racist and sexist themselves.

Crumb’s sophomoric pushback to his critics would spark a backlash of its own, as Dauber details: “A later Roberta Gregory story, ‘Crazy Bitches,’ had a more confrontational response, depicting women angrily reading R. Crumb; when a husband objects it’s ‘classic American culture,’ they bite off his [member], stuff it in his mouth, and then [defecate] on his head.” We’re not dealing with the political correctness of today’slandscape.

As a history, Dauber’s book is consistently interesting, if a hair unwieldy. He condenses the entirety of the American art form into 445 pages—from anti-Tammany comic strips, to the daily funnies that buoyed the newspaper industry and were read by as many as 100 million people in the 1960s, to the rise of standalone books that include every genre from superhero to super-neurotic. I was shocked to note that *Calvin and Hobbes* and *The Far Side* merit only a single paragraph combined and no real discussion of the influence of either on the art or the business of comics, but surely these two masterly works of American popular culture—arguably the greatest achievements in the history of the newspaper-strip form—deserve more attention.

There are some odd omissions, such as the lack of reference to the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund—which spent much of the 1980s and 1990s defending artists and comic-book store owners from overzealous local officials. And there are moments, particularly toward the end of the book, when it feels as though Dauber is simply rattling off names and titles so no one will feel snubbed—as when he highlights a series of comics based on the Western canon by modern artists.

No one will come away from this work questioning Dauber’s progressive bona fides, even if it skews some of the work within. One small thing that jumped out to me as someone who watched the sentence in question play out in real time: “Writer Chuck Wendig was abruptly fired by Marvel after tweeting opposition to Brett Kavanaugh’s Supreme Court candidacy,” Dauber writes in the epilogue. That’s true-ish, though the “opposition” was couched by Wendig writing of elected Republicans: “They can eat s—t. All of them. They can eat a boot covered in s—t. Winter is coming you callous f—-necks, you prolapsed a—holes, you grotesque monsters, you racists and rapists and wretched abusers.” I tend to think that people shouldn’t be fired for what they tweet, but a Disney-owned property like Marvel is unlikely to smile upon one of its writers suggesting that half the marketplace should eat a boot covered in feces. If mundane opposition to GOP politicians were enough to end someone’s employment, Disney wouldn’t be able to staff its parks, let alone its movies. And as its handling of the conservative darling Gina Carano showed—she was fired by Disney too, from the Star Wars show *The Mandalorian*—the unwillingness of Disney brass to tolerate headaches on social media was a bipartisan phenomenon.

Dauber, a professor of Yiddish at Columbia University who has written for Commentary, properly raises the highly problematic...
issues, on page and off, that have plagued the world of comic books and their creators. At one point, he asks, “Was the superhero business inherently toxic?” The real question his book raises is this: What part of comic-book history wasn’t inherently toxic? From whitewashing the early history of comic strips to the racism of the Comics Code Authority to the sexism of the underground comics to the toxic fandoms that congregated in comic-book shops and festered online, the world of comics has been dominated by unpleasantnesses and weirdnesses from the beginning.

Why the Oscars Are in Critical Condition

How Hollywood has undermined its own great PR device

By Michael Medved

While political junkies focus on the new year’s upcoming midterm elections, the first weeks of 2022 bring another spate of high-profile balloting to shape the direction of pop culture. By February 8, nearly 10,000 members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences will have cast votes to choose nominees for this year’s Oscar ceremony, scheduled for Sunday, March 27.

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The 10 top vote-getters will qualify as finalists for this year’s Best Picture, in the process sending a message about the projects deemed most worthy of honor, acclaim, and imitation.

The first priority for the industry in 2022 is to avoid a repeat of last year’s universally derided “train wreck at the train station.” To prevent a super-spreader event in the middle of a raging pandemic, the Oscar officials strictly limited the size of the live audience and moved the proceedings from Hollywood Boulevard to the freshly restored art deco Union Station in downtown L.A. Despite the new venue’s heritage, its producers—among them the Oscar-winning director Steven Soderbergh—couldn’t get the trains to run on time, as participants traded a deadly virus for deadly boredom. The broadcast on ABC TV drew an audience that shattered every available figure for feebleness, with an average of 10.4 million viewers—down 56 percent (!) from the previous year’s numbers. This constituted the lowest viewership for an Oscar telecast since the Academy began compiling such numbers 47 years earlier.

The problem went far deeper than clumsy gag lines or the absence of glitzy musical numbers; it centered on the nature of those films that the industry has recently decorated. Nomadland, last year’s big winner (for picture, director, and Frances McDormand as best actress) told a bleak story of a lonely widow who leaves her Nevada town after a corporate closure and hits the road in her battered RV. She camps alongside other van dwellers in the haunting high desert, insisting, in the film’s most notable line: “No, I’m not homeless. Just houseless.”

The previous year, the top honor went to Parasite, a subtitled Korean-language film described as a “black comedy thriller” about “class conflict, social inequality, and wealth disparity” in modern Seoul. Its gruesome climax depicts bloody revenge against the wealthy family that’s been exploiting a less fortunate clan of impostor servants as drivers, housekeepers, cooks, and tutors.

No one can deny the skill and artistry displayed in both of these productions, but they also highlight a profound shift in emphasis away from what Hollywood has traditionally sought to celebrate. Going back to the beginning of the Academy Awards in 1928, the entertainment industry has leaned toward epic, grandiose qualities—exalting pictures that advanced the medium’s ambitions as a serious art form with its own collection of widely recognized classics. Winners included such classic films as All Quiet on the Western Front (1930), Gone with the Wind (1940), Casablanca (1944), The Bridge on the River Kwai (1958), Ben Hur (1960),

It’s no coincidence that Titanic, the last traditional epic blockbuster to sweep the Oscars some 24 years ago, also earned record-breaking response from the television audience. The 1998 ceremony during which it cruised to an astonishing 11 Oscars also won an average of 57.3 million television viewers for the length of the broadcast—more than five times the audience for the Nomadland Oscars. The Nielsen ratings showed 35 percent of all households tuning in to Tinseltown’s big show, while last year the percentage had plummeted to 5.9 percent.

Critics may deride the old-fashioned, heart-tugging cinematic spectacles that used to dominate the yearly Oscar contests—and apologists may claim that the decline in television-watching in general is the culprit, as well as the proliferation of awards shows that have stolen some of the thunder. Still, the current ratings reveal a decline in Prestige Hollywood’s ability to connect with the public in any realm outside of the superhero genre. If you consider the 10 Best Picture winners to precede Parasite and Nomadland, none achieved notable success at the box office none drew strong ratings to the Oscar ceremony, and none seems destined for the status of timeless classic. Going back all the way to the rousing, fantasy epic The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King in 2004, it appears that the industry has either forgotten, or at least forsaken, the old formula for Oscar-bait success. Which of the more recent winners will be cherished or honored for decades in the future?

- Green Book (2019)
- The Shape of Water (2018)
- Moonlight (2017)
- Spotlight (2016)
- Birdman (2015)
- 12 Years a Slave (2014)
- Argo (2013)
- The Artist (2012)
- The King’s Speech (2011)
- The Hurt Locker (2010)
- Slumdog Millionaire (2009)
- No Country for Old Men (2008)
- The Departed (2007)
- Crash (2006)
- Million Dollar Baby (2005)

You can spot some marvelous films on this list. I’m especially fond of The Artist, which won 2012’s award—an eccentric victor in that it was a whimsical French black-and-white silent about Hollywood before the advent of sound. But one can hardly suspect that a successful sequel or remake would someday spring from this singular triumph, as the glorious Best Picture from 1962 has now inspired a reverent and electrifying new version that’s already emerged as a front-runner for this year’s awards.

The original West Side Story followed the well-worn path to Oscar glory, utilizing a Broadway smash as its basis and combining overwhelming commercial success with soaring artistic ambition. The new edition, directed superbly by Steven Spielberg, not only improves on the casting (with authentically young and authentically Latino actors in all the appropriate roles) but captures its own spectacular and exhilarating choreography with even better camera work and editing. Box-office performance has been disappointing so far, but it may have enough staying power on theater screens to earn back most or all of its prodigious cost, particularly if the film secures the multiple Academy Award nominations that everyone expects.

In fact, West Side Story is only the most obvious expression of an unofficial “Back to the ‘60s’” theme that has become a subtle but significant aspect of this year’s Best Picture race. Five of the favorites for multiple awards nominations either depict that bygone era on screen, or make use of source material that originated more than 60 years ago. Dune, the eye-popping and star-studded sci-fi spectacular, dramatizes the first half of Frank Herbert’s landmark 1965 novel. The Power of the Dog is about a Montana Ranch in 1925, but the novel that provides the basis for the film first appeared in 1967. Kenneth Branagh lovingly re-creates the memories of his childhood in Belfast, which opens with the August 1969 riot that began “The Troubles” that plagued Northern Ireland for three decades. Licorice Pizza displays similar affection for the time of America’s troubles (and tastelessness) in L.A.’s San Fernando Valley in 1973, with a plucky teenager trying to make the most of water beds, gas lines, and the “new politics” of the period.

This unmistakable yearning for good-bad-old-days may help lead the Academy to establish a more coherent connection this year between the best of Hollywood’s present work and the still resonant echoes of its glorious past. If the 2022 ceremony also encourages a return to the time-honored pattern of celebrating crowd-pleasing, mass-audience, uplifting, and timeless Oscar epics, that could brighten the atmosphere for both the entertainment industry and the nation at large.
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is content. You need a creative operation like a studio or production company that generates and acquires new scripted and non-scripted fare, including sports and special events. The second leg is a streaming or premium cable service that requires a subscription and requires monthly credit-card billing, accompanied by an enormously complicated cancellation process.

The third leg—and this is the one everyone forgets about—is a broad-based platform, like a boring old broadcasting network, a basic cable channel, or a group of television stations. That platform is a business with a large audience that pays nothing to watch, and which allows you to promote your content and get a wide audience sample as quickly and cheaply as possible. A platform is a place where the audience already is.

That third piece is what is missing from most of the newly combined media companies or rumored merger-and-acquisition activity in Hollywood. But it is that piece—that extremely uncool piece—that will be the difference between a company that succeeds and one that is broken up and sold in pieces in a few years during the next big entertainment-industry anxiety attack—which is currently scheduled for sometime in 2026, when a lot of Netflix bonds mature.

Releasing a new title—any new title, on streaming, premium, or in the theater—into the kaleidoscope of the current marketplace is a difficult proposition. Consider the case of *Yellowstone*, one of the biggest hits on television. The series premiered in 2018 on the Paramount Network. At the time, it theoretically reached about 80 million viewers. No one had ever heard of the Paramount Network. Now imagine if *Yellowstone* had premiered on a broadcast network in its first or second season. Or even in its first or second episode. On CBS—where the audience already is—*Yellowstone* might have garnered anywhere between 6 and 8 million weekly viewers. That audience sample could have launched its move to pay cable, subscription streamer, or anywhere else the producers wanted—with hugely remunerative benefits. But the show’s weak platform kept it from breaking out until its third season. By this time the studio had sold the streaming rights to rival studio Comcast’s Peacock streaming service for relative pennies. Peacock basically launched itself with the mishandled hit produced by one of its major competitors.

Platforms aren’t sexy. They are not talked about in fancy lunch spots. Their CEOs are rarely photographed on the red carpet or swanning around a Sun Valley media-mogul conference. But they still rule.

The Nexstar Media Group is in talks to purchase the CW Network from its joint owners, CBS and Warner Bros. The CW is the home of a lot of popular teen dramas like *Riverdale*. Nexstar owns a string of local television stations—exactly the unglamorous assets that make sophisticated entertainment-industry types snicker—but the resulting company will have a pretty impressive platform to reach into the young-adult audience.

Or how about basic cable channel INSP—pronounced, I’m told, letter-by-letter and not “inspuh”—which began as Jim and Tammy Bakker’s PTL Club and has transformed, over the years, into a channel that shows old movies, Westerns, and old-fashioned family entertainment. Its primetime audience is larger than TLC’s or Food Network’s, and in daily viewers it’s bigger than USA Network or TBS.

In a few years, both of those unsexy and little-known platforms will be crucial to a streaming service or media colossus looking to compete with Disney+ for the youth-and-family audience. Both of them are places where that audience already is. Nexstar and INSP and a handful of other companies are going to be very popular at the entertainment-industry deal-making restaurant. The next time you see them, they’ll be sitting back, arms folded.

Investment bankers get paid enormously for the advice I just gave away for free. This explains why many of them have summer homes on Nantucket and I am driving a 2018 Subaru Outback. But as a television writer and producer, I know that in the great Media Bazaar currently happening, what I need is for the buying and selling and leaning-forward and sitting-back guys to pause for a while and for someone to call my agent and offer me a job.
THE TRICK to every financial transaction—and I’m using the phrase “financial transaction” in the Hollywood sense, to describe any encounter between two people who are not related by blood—is to know who is the buyer and who is the seller. Which isn’t always easy.

Every writer I know has sat down to a promising meeting with a producer to talk about a project only slowly to discover that the person he’s talking to is one of the many people in the entertainment business who do not have any actual money to spend, despite the expensive suit and the enormous wristwatch.

The meeting will begin with small talk and flattery. The producer will tell the writer how talented he is. The writer will be dazzled by the A. Lange & Söhne watch that flashes in the sunlight. But it will slowly dawn on the writer that the producer wants him to write a script for free. The producer was selling, not buying.

It’s something you can see at any restaurant where people in entertainment gather to do business. If you look at the table and see one person leaning forward and one person leaning back, arms folded, then you have the classic snapshot of a seller and a buyer. One person is on the attack, in pitch mode. The other in the power position, in talk-to-me mode.

If you have two people leaning back, or worse, two people leaning forward, then you’ve got a mismatch. You’ve got, as we say in show business, big story problems.

And that, when you get right down to it, is what’s happening in the entertainment business. I’m talking about Amazon buying MGM; the merger of Warner Bros. and Discovery; rumors that Apple is about to buy a movie studio; rumors that the recombined Viacom/CBS behemoth is about to make a major move.

But the buyers in these transactions aren’t leaning backward, arms folded. They’re leaning forward, too.

If all of the entertainment buying and selling were actually happening in a restaurant, what you’d see is a lot of leaning forward, a lot of enthusiastic buyers and cheerful sellers, a lot of people thinking that the other person at the table is the answer to their problems. Which, as we all know, is never the case, in life, love, or show business.

What you’d hear in that restaurant are the same three words spoken at every table. The words: Content is King. That’s what media executives are saying, that’s what investors are saying, and—especially—that’s what content creators are saying. Gaining access to content is the strategic underpinning of most of the buying and selling going on in the entertainment business right now.

That strategy—and as someone who makes money selling television shows, it kills me to say this—is the wrong one.

A successful modern media behemoth is a three-legged stool. The first leg

Rob Long has been the executive producer of six TV series.
We have tee shirts. We have tote bags. We have sweatshirts.

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