THE UNBEARABLE BLEAKNESS OF SCHOOLING

How contemporary education fetishizes the bad and the broken in American life

BY ROBERT PONDISCIO
No charitable gift has a greater impact on the lives of Israelis.

There are many ways to support Israel and its people, but none is more transformative than a gift to Magen David Adom, Israel’s paramedic and Red Cross service. Your gift to MDA isn’t just changing lives — it’s literally saving them — providing critical care and hospital transport for everyone from victims of heart attacks to casualties of rocket attacks.

Save a life through a gift to Magen David Adom today.
Support MDA by visiting AFMDA.org/give or calling 866.632.2763.
The word “irreplaceable” seems to be most often deployed in a sentimental way at the end of someone’s tenure to describe people who are, in fact, eminently replaceable—take, for instance, the now-ousted CNN honcho Jeff Zucker, whose time at the network led to a net loss of 30 percent of its most desirable audience. This makes him not only replaceable but easily outdistanced.

Which is why it’s meaningful that the best and maybe the only word to describe the late Terry Teachout, when it comes to this magazine and his role in it, is “irreplaceable.” It is literally true. He will not be, and cannot be, replaced as Commentary’s critic-at-large, the position he held on our masthead from the beginning of my tenure as editor in 2009.

There is no one in America, or anywhere else in the Anglophone world, who could possibly combine his vast knowledge of the arts both high and low with the ability to generate a work of analytical and critical value every single month. There is no successor who could produce a piece on the British composer William Walton, then one on Tom Stoppard, then Nat King Cole, then Frank Sinatra’s arranger Nelson Riddle, then film noir—after which he could seek to answer the question of why there are so few black classical musicians before turning back to the value of movie theaters and the star power of Clark Gable.

His horrific and untimely passing at the age of 65 would itself have made for a fascinating article by Terry Teachout. What, Terry might have asked, made Terry Teachout irreplaceable?

I say that’s how he would have put it because his pieces had a remarkably common structure to them. Terry would begin, in effect, by asking why on earth he was even bothering to write the article you were reading.

Why would it be of interest to you to spend a few thousand words reading about Clark Gable? Or Robert Mitchum? Or Mike Nichols? Or John Huston? Who were these long-gone people anyway? If they are well-remembered, why? And if they are largely forgotten—as was the case with, say, Oscar Levant, the subject of one of his best columns—what was it about them that caused their light to dim?

He always came up with interesting answers. But while Terry was not a modest person at all—he knew with a kind of cool confidence that he was a singular talent—he was actually unaware of the ultimate answer to his “why should you read about X now” question. And that answer was: It was worth reading because he was the one writing it.

Terry Teachout could have written about chewing gum and made it interesting, because he could convey the thing that was of particular interest to him on almost any subject with a kind of infectious but always calm enthusiasm. He was not given to superlatives, but the very fact that he found a subject worthy of his attention constituted a superlative of its own.

As the many tributes written to him upon his nightmarishly untimely death have made clear—including the beautiful one by Bruce Bawer that appears in this issue—Terry was extraordinarily unusual in his professional kindesses, collegial courtesy, and appreciation of the works of others. But unlike many who spend their lives as critics, he was never a suck-up and he was never a patsy. He believed in the value of art, and he believed in being honest with his readers. He never lost sight of his responsibility to uphold one in service of the other.

And that, dear reader, is the most irreplaceable quality of all.

Commentary
# Commentary

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To the Editor:

CHRISTINE ROSEN’S excellent article contains one problematic comment: that the difference between biological sex and gender identity is not the central issue (“The New Misogyny,” January).

As a psychiatrist, I disagree with the concept of “gender identity” and prefer the term “gender preference.” The latter term makes it clear that those who were born and grew up as one biological sex, and who have the chromosomes corresponding to this sex, may change their clothes, take hormones, or have radical surgery, but they will still be a man or a woman from birth who has undertaken such steps.

Why might they have undertaken those steps? Perhaps they were unhappy with being the sex they were born into—again, “preference,” not “identity.” Or they genuinely believe that they were born into the wrong body, which indicates a mental disturbance.

JOSEPH BERGER, M.D.
Netanya, Israel

To the Editor:

KUDOS TO Christine Rosen for outlining in detail the essential nature of transgender activism.

One thing she doesn’t mention is the fantastic element in contemporary claims that biology is not destiny. For if I can say that I am actually a man or a woman despite my biology, why can’t I say I am the King of England?

MARTA VARELA
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

To the Editor:

I JUST FINISHED reading Christine Rosen’s “The New Misogyny.” As I read the last paragraph, I let out a loud “yes!”

The article contains all of the points that some of my closest friends and I have been discussing in private. It’s wonderful to see all the pieces of the puzzle put together in one place to demonstrate why this new trend is so terribly dangerous.

March 2022

Misogyny and the Trans Movement
It’s too risky for me to speak out on this topic publicly at the moment, and the same goes for my friends. So thank you very much for saying these things out loud. And I cannot thank Commentary enough for publishing this piece and for taking the risk to put viewpoints like this out there. Essays such as this pave the way for more of us to feel supported in speaking out about why this trend just cannot be allowed to continue without frank discussion and debate.

Lisa Weiter
Columbus, Ohio

To the Editor:

CHRISTINE ROSEN’s article on transgenderism and misogyny is well-written, comprehensive, and excellent. Rosen calls out trans activism for what it is: misogyny. This insanity—biological men on women’s sports teams, to take one egregious example—will not stop until everyday people lose their fear and say “enough.” There may be some casualties along the way, but there will be no détente reached through discussion or reasoned dialogue. The opposing side is not looking for accommodation. It seeks cultural victory by destroying anyone who does not embrace its dogma.

John Murphy
Manila, Philippines

To the Editor:

THE ABSURDITIES that Christine Rosen writes about are becoming more common, extreme, and compulsory. We live in a social world that recognizes no transcendent authority above it, no history behind it (except the history of its own coming into being), and no nature of things beneath it that can—
Letters : March 2022

Sondheim

To the Editor:

JOHN PODHORETZ’S analysis of Stephen Sondheim’s career was excellent (“Stephen Sondheim’s America,” January). I quite agree that Assassins is a “full-frontal assault on the United States.” This point of view is prominent in much of the cultural establishment.

Sondheim’s work was frequently an emblem of otherness worn with pride by many sophisticates.

ALEXANDER GOLDSTEIN
Brooklyn, New York

Christine Rosen writes:

I APPRECIATE JOSEPH Berger raising the issue of distinctions between the use of “gender identity” and “gender preference.” It is challenging to clarify such terms, and there is little consistency in how they are used in everyday discussion (I have also seen “gender expression”; “AFAB” or “AMAB,” Assigned Female at Birth and Assigned Male at Birth, respectively; Female- or Male-presenting, etc.). But the key point, as Dr. Berger notes, is that any term should recognize biological realities, as those biological realities have significant impact on individuals’ lives regardless of whether they are trans or not. At the very least, the biological realities should be part of any discussion of trans rights vs. women’s rights. Perhaps this is why the more radical elements of the trans movement have made a concerted effort to hijack the language one is “allowed” to use to discuss such realities; they do not wish to have an open debate about biology.

Lisa Weiter is correct to note a distinguishing feature of the current trans-rights movement: its willingness to shut down debate and label as transphobic anyone who raises objections to their project. This is not accidental. It is an effort to deny the vast majority of the public—and women in particular—the opportunity to raise legitimate concerns about personal privacy and safety. It also prohibits respectful dialogue about the potential risks to women including, for example, allowing born-male prisoners in women’s prisons, or born-male individuals to oversee women’s shelters.

This points to something several readers correctly observed, particularly Marta Varela: If one is able to “identify” as another biological sex, what is the limiting principle? Could not one also identify as a different race or species? And what are the possible negative effects of embracing such excessive individualism—an individualism that not only denies biological reality but insists everyone else deny it as well.

Both John Murphy and Isaac Pollak remind us of what this has already yielded, practically and culturally. Practically, the trans movement has succeeded in taking rights and opportunities away from women (in women’s sports but also in the workplace) while claiming they are advancing tolerance. At the cultural level, the trans movement’s efforts to coerce major institutions to accept their definition of reality and ignore the limits of biology have stifled our ability to hold the kind of open discussion of these issues that we so urgently need.

Isaac Pollak
New York City

To the Editor:

JOHN PODHORETZ’S essay on Stephen Sondheim was filled with wonderful, informative analysis of a truly gifted artist. It was also an insightful view of the 1950s—as a time when popular cultural works were entertaining and well-written.

Sondheim’s insights into man’s ambivalent nature is worthy of close study. Think of Into the Woods. It is rich with psychological themes. In a fairy-tale world of make-believe, we have suffering and moral ambiguity. We have heroes who resort to deceit. From the show’s prologue: “We have to live / I don’t care how.” We have villains with sympathetic motives.

Sondheim wrote of the tension
between experience and reflection. And those lyrics, at their best, rival the work of Albert Camus as economical expressions of existentialism:

Oh, if life were made of moments
Even now and then a bad one,
But if life were only moments,
Then you’d never know you had one.

In Camus’s *The Stranger*, Meursault is able to respond emotionally to life only once he is condemned to die and recognizes the transitory nature of existence. For Sondheim—and Camus—life lived in the here and now is not the same thing as life upon reflection.

**Rusiagagate Redux**

To the Editor:

REGARDING Eli Lake’s article on Russiagate enthusiasts (“Bitterly Clinging to Russiagate,” January): In 2016 and 2017, they claimed that Donald Trump was so clueless and gullible that he was going to give the KGB a foothold in the West Wing and the Pentagon. It’s not that he hated and despised the country necessarily, it was just that he had no clue he was being used by Vladimir Putin. But now the same enthusiasts have transformed Trump into a Doctor Evil who duped the Russians, the media, the DOJ, the FBI, and the CIA. He not only outsmarted the KGB and the FBI, you see, but his evident scheme with Russia was itself some kind of hoax, the purpose of which was to sidetrack the media and investigators while he actually did turn control of the country over to the Russians—a triple cross. In other words, according to these folks, Trump was the most brilliant man to ever set foot in the Oval Office.

**Pseudoscientific Babble**

To the Editor:

THANK YOU to Kevin Williamson for taking a pickax to the cavalier and fashionable use of the names of neurotransmitters in writing about political and philosophical issues (“The Denial of Agency,” January). One also encounters many overused catchphrases from neurobiology, including, for example, “lizard brain.” Naturally, the people who are casually discussing these things never feel entrapped by their own limited understanding. As a physician, I can only say that even experts have a very rudimentary understanding of the physical substrate of thought. People who are depressed may benefit from some juggling of neurotransmitters, but it is not obvious exactly how this works. What is bipolar illness? How does lithium help? The leap from basic science to the clinical level is never obvious or easy. Things that should work may not, and things that should not work, may. As everyone knows, at the level of complex behaviors, self-control is hard won, control of others often impossible.

No one should cite neurobiology as a proof of why people do what they do.

ALAN GOLDMAN, M.D.
Lawrence, New York

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ALAN GOLDMAN, M.D.
Lawrence, New York

**Commentary**
FOR 40 YEARS, Ladies’ Home Journal featured a column called “Can This Marriage Be Saved?” It offered advice to couples seeking counsel on the state of their unions. Whatever the value of the advice (pity the wives; they were frequently unfairly blamed for their husbands’ bad behavior), it was wildly popular because it publicly engaged an institution that most Americans either participated in or aspired to join: wedlock.

How times change.

The New York Times Weddings section, once famously described in an episode of Sex and the City as “the women’s sports pages,” recently announced that it is questioning whether marriage is worth saving at all. “The Weddings Section Asks What It Means to Be Committed in 2022,” the headline announcing the section’s new focus noted, but the question was clearly rhetorical. Its new editor, Charanna Alexander, has already begun to “move away from the traditional Times wedding announcement” and noted that the “evolved Weddings section” would now be “exploring what it means to be committed in 2022, whether or not that includes marriage.”

Evidently only rubes think marriage is an institution for raising families and ensuring social stability. Times readers know better. “I really came in wanting to change everyone’s perception of the types of couples we feature,” Alexander said. “I wanted to not only make it more racially diverse, but also culturally diverse. I just really wanted to look for holes in our previous coverage, so that we can start to be a section that everyone can see themselves in.”

If you are an average person who sees yourself in a traditional marriage, the Times is putting you on notice that your status has been downgraded. The traditional Vows column that runs every Sunday still features a story of a single couple, but the shorter traditional announcements that were long the meat of the marriage pages are no more. Instead, readers are invited to submit their stories for the diminutive Mini-Vows section, which might more accurately be called Struggle Love, since that is what it elevates. As Alexander puts it, “the common thread of all of our Mini-Vows is that the couples all share some moments of transition where they have to overcome something together.”

Presumably the Mini-Vows approach is meant to yield a section less apt to celebrate the predictable joining of family assets and/or Ivy League résumés. But what it has produced in its stead is a lot of emotive hyperbole and oversharing, the overall effect of which is remarkably banal. The new submissions process asks couples “to really dig deep into their love story and...
and tell us what makes them click: how they came together; what their relationship means to them, and maybe even the people in their lives; and how they’ve changed since they’ve been together.” Alexander adds: “We’re just asking couples to go a little deeper, which gives us a better sense, once we get a submission, to say, ‘Hey, this is really inspiring.’” Merely getting married is too vanilla for the Times reader. Now, your story must be akin to a TED talk; it must “inspire” others.

But inspire them to do what? The new form the Times developed for Mini-Vows submissions suggests it still wants to play on people’s warm feelings about traditional weddings. The online page features a traditional black-and-white photo of a mid-20th-century couple (young, white, and in their wedding clothes) kissing in the back of a Ford, but the Times’ requirements for submission suggest they are far from the ideal. “We are actively seeking couples with interesting, inspiring and diverse love stories that represent and reflect the world around us,” the page says.

To merit the Times’ attention, couples must first puzzle through what “diverse love” is before ensuring that they present themselves as “interesting,” or at least what passes as interesting to Times editors. Pity the boring couples who didn’t nearly die while summiting K2 together or parlay their dating traumas into a hit podcast. A smattering of Mini-Vows announcements from late January included stories such as “Holding On Through Tragedy After Tragedy” and “United by Sorrow, They Forged a Joyful Future.” The old Times wedding announcements, which listed the backgrounds of the bride and groom (and, until recently, those of their parents) had the stuffy and often WASPy tone of a mergers-and-acquisitions statement. The new Times wedding announcements have the unnerving, forced zaniness of an episode of Married at First Sight.

Then again, to garner the new Weddings section imprimatur, the most radical act might be to refuse to get married at all. “We’re looking to tell stories of commitments that are not necessarily associated with marriage,” Alexander says. “What we’ve been seeing is that a lot of people are not getting married and are not committing in that traditional sense.” She adds, “We will begin to tell stories outside of our traditional Mini-Vows that explore relationships outside of what we know to be marriage…. I do feel that it is time that we get into what is considered nontraditional and kind of normalize that.” She wants to “expand what the word commitment means.”

But why do this in a section traditionally devoted to an age-old institution? It’s not like the Times doesn’t already cover alternatives to marriage in its pages. The paper’s Modern Love column is devoted to the quirkier side of finding happiness, often in nontraditional relationships. A recent feature explored the “poly adventures” of various throuples. And when writing about marriage, the general tone is one of horrified skepticism. The advice columnist Heather Havrilesky offered up a first-person essay about marriage that began with the question “Do I hate my husband?” and answered, “Oh for sure yes, definitely.” A recently divorced essayist asked, “What Does Marriage Ask Us to Give Up?” (Hint: The correct answer is Too Much.)

Of course, college-educated elites are still by and large marrying each other, a fact left unmentioned and unexplored in the reimagined Weddings section. It’s an odd omission given how much class (and class envy) has always loomed large in its pages. The new coin of the realm might be paens to “diverse love” and trauma rather than degrees from Harvard and Yale, but at the end of the day, the Times is still documenting an elite sport.

In one sense, the new Weddings section guidelines are the perfect encapsulation of the views of our elite cultural arbiters: A wedding section that is not about weddings, and that demands from its subjects an extraordinary degree of solipsism and the airing of trauma and grievances (both real and imagined) to make their stories worth featuring.

Whatever the dramatic potential of such coverage might be, the central purpose of the reimagining of the Weddings section is to promote the destruction of traditionalism—and then to cheerlead for that destruction. It encourages readers to see the institution of marriage more as a yoke than a bond. It views courtship as an arduous struggle rather than an adventure. The impulse is destructive and revolutionary, even if it proves fluffy, dull, and ludicrous in its execution.
MORE THAN 50 years after Apollo 11 set down on the Sea of Tranquility, people still like to say, “If we can put a man on the moon, why can’t...?” Sometimes the phrase captures a sense of frustration, as in a recent newspaper editorial lamenting gaps in urban snow removal: “Why can’t they clear the sidewalks?!” More often, the man-on-the-moon trope gets deployed to remind us what great things human ingenuity—combined with massive federal spending—can accomplish. A 2009 book, *If We Can Put a Man on the Moon: Getting Big Things Done in Government*, pretty much sums up that approach. When the Biden White House recently unveiled a new medical-research initiative, the project was dubbed—you guessed it—the “Cancer Moonshot.”

It’s easy to see why fans of big government programs like to hold up NASA as the gleaming archetype of bureaucracy at its best. The Apollo program really was one of humankind’s most inspiring achievements. But it was anything but a lean, mean operation. The effort that eventually put 12 men on the moon employed 400,000 workers and consumed up to 4.4 percent of the federal budget over a decade. Was it worth it? I think so. Was it a sustainable way to maintain a human presence in space? Not even close.

And have you ever noticed that those paeans to NASA’s can-do spirit tend to ignore the agency’s accomplishments since, oh, about the time Apollo 17’s crew left the moon in 1972? NASA’s post-Apollo history is a frustrating lesson in how a once-resourceful bureaucracy can get dragged down by, well, bureaucracy. NASA continues to do important work in space—including operating space telescopes and Mars rovers. Let’s call that Good NASA. But over the past five decades, the space agency has also demonstrated an alarming tendency to get bogged down in dead-end programs, lose track of real goals, and waste massive quantities of money. That’s Bad NASA. And anyone who claims to care about making government work needs to understand how Bad NASA got that way.

It wasn’t because it hired the wrong people. To this day, NASA is full of brilliant, dedicated professionals. But lack of focus and perverse incentives have taken their toll on the agency. Take the space shuttle. After Apollo, NASA knew it couldn’t keep launching gargantuan Saturn V rockets every time it wanted to put people and things in orbit. The reusable shuttle vehicle was supposed to be a reliable and affordable replacement. It was a good idea that just didn’t work. The shuttle turned out to be horrifically expensive to fly and far too prone to exploding in flight. It should have been retired after the 1986 Challenger disaster. But there was no replacement ready, and...
Congress wouldn’t let NASA move on in any event.

Lawmakers in Congress liked the shuttle not despite its huge expense, but because of it. The shuttle program involved hundreds of contractors and thousands of jobs, spread across some 36 states. That added up to a lot of politicians who could brag about bringing home the NASA bacon—and not too many advocates for a safer, more affordable approach. Even when Congress finally agreed to let NASA start developing a new launch system, it insisted the agency build the biggest, most expensive rocket possible. The most powerful lawmakers successfully demanded that the new rocket include specific components that just happened to be manufactured in their districts.

The program some called “Apollo on steroids” was controversial from the start. Various space experts (and even some NASA leaders) advocated killing it outright, but Congress prevailed. And presidents from George W. Bush to Joe Biden all promised that U.S. astronauts would soon be flying the new rocket to the moon—or even heading to Mars. The current version, known as the Space Launch System, has already soaked up $20 billion without ever leaving the ground.

This year, SLS (with its “Orion” crew capsule on top) may finally make it to the launch pad. The new rocket is a beast; in its ultimate iteration it will be even bigger than Saturn V. Unlike Elon Musk’s SpaceX, which recovers and reuses boosters and other rocket components to cut costs, SLS was designed by NASA to be fully expendable. And that makes it obscenely expensive. At a time when launch prices are plummeting around the world, SLS could cost as much as $2 billion per mission—a price tag that guarantees it will barely ever fly. Meanwhile, SpaceX has begun testing its next-generation “Starship.” This huge, fully reusable rocket will be able to do almost everything SLS does at a tiny fraction of the cost.

So why did NASA spend decades building an overpriced rocket that it doesn’t need and that it will probably launch only a handful of times? Because flying astronauts wasn’t the real goal. The program was designed to maximize jobs and expenditures, not to make spaceflight routine and affordable. That’s Bad NASA in a nutshell. Anyone who wants to put the government in control of, say, health care or energy infrastructure should study this lesson in how NASA almost entirely lost its ability to do the main thing it was created to do: fly people into space.

Fortunately, Good NASA still coexists. Even while the agency was doubling down on SLS, NASA leaders were simultaneously reaching out to SpaceX and other private space companies. As I wrote in a 2020 column, NASA forged a private-public partnership with SpaceX in which it pays the company a fee to launch cargo and astronauts to the International Space Station. (The concept is a bit like chartering a fishing boat rather than trying to build and sail your own.) The SpaceX relationship is saving NASA billions. It also allows the agency to fly more missions than it could have flown with either the shuttle or SLS.

“What NASA does best is planetary science,” says aerospace consultant Rand Simberg, author of Safe Is Not an Option, a critique of the agency’s overly conservative approach to manned spaceflight. “What it does worst is develop and operate systems for human spaceflight, as exemplified by SLS/Orion.” Simberg and other “new space” advocates hope to see SpaceX—and other emerging private space ventures—continue giving NASA new and more efficient ways to accomplish missions. “I think the advent of Starship is going to allow NASA to do a lot more planetary science,” he says. In fact, the agency has already announced that it has selected Musk’s Starship as a potential lunar landing vehicle for future moon missions.

While NASA astronauts haven’t ventured beyond low Earth orbit in decades, the agency has achieved spectacular successes in unmanned exploration. Dozens of NASA space probes and telescopes are exploring the solar system and the universe right now. That’s Good NASA at its best. The Perseverance rover landed on Mars in 2020 and is conducting ambitious geological research. After many delays and cost overruns, the James Webb Space Telescope launched late last year and successfully deployed its enormous gold-plated mirror. It might turn out to be one of the biggest advances in space imaging since Galileo first pointed his telescope at the night sky in 1609.

Can NASA also reinvigorate its flagging human-spaceflight program? I think so. The key will be letting the agency focus on what it does best and leaving the rest to private industry. As Simberg and other experts advise, NASA should stop trying to build hardware and simply buy the services it needs from more nimble enterprises. It’s time to break up the NASA Industrial Complex. And while we’re at it, can we retire the idea that every national problem can be solved with a huge Apollo-style government program?

Exploring space remains vital, both as part of America’s cultural progress and for national defense. (Don’t look now, but China is trying to seize the high ground over our heads.) No doubt, entrepreneurs like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos will be launching more of their own private space missions. And that competition will be good for U.S.-based innovation. But NASA still needs to play a leading role in space exploration. Let’s just make sure we put Good NASA in charge. And let’s stop saying “If we can put a man on the moon...”
THE CITY NAME “Munich” is already profoundly associated with cinematic moral confusion. It was the title Steven Spielberg gave his relativistic reflection on the way the Mossad avenged the murder of Israeli athletes in 1972. Now Netflix has given us Munich: The Edge of War, a prestige film that has gained a high-end audience and that has been hailed by many critics. At its heart is a quest to undo the legacy of one of history’s greatest heroes and to lionize one of its weakest statesmen.

The movie seeks nothing less than to celebrate Neville Chamberlain, a man whose name is eternally affiliated with appeasement. It focuses on the meeting between the British prime minister and Hitler when the latter asserted Germany’s right to the Czech territory Germans called the Sudentenland. Chamberlain conceded and returned home brandishing a signed promise by Hitler not to wage war on Britain.

Told primarily through the eyes of two young aides to these leaders, Munich: The Edge of War pushes back on the notion that Chamberlain was duped by the Führer. The film instead portrays a canny prime minister who seeks to buy time before a war that seems likely to come. In the movie, following the conference at Munich, the English aide glumly goes home and tells his wife that Chamberlain’s deal with Hitler was “just a delay.” He goes on: “The PM’s given us a chance of winning the damn thing when it happens. It’s quite some service when you think about it.” The film further concludes by informing the audience that Chamberlain’s agreement allowed time for Britain to arm, as if preparation for war had been the prime minister’s intention all along.

The source of this naked historical revisionism is Robert Harris, the author of the bestselling 2017 novel on which the movie is based. As Harris has made clear in interviews, he believes the heroic image of Churchill as the only leader in Britain who understood Hitler’s purposes and intentions is mistaken. “We have a very strong image of this island standing alone, weak, defenseless—pulled back together by an effort of will,” Harris has said. “Well, none of it’s really true.” For Harris, Chamberlain is the overlooked giant of the battle against Nazism. His novel is “a real re-evaluation of this historical figure, a great man.”

This anti-Churchill thesis has been embraced by Jeremy Irons, the Oscar-winning British actor who plays Chamberlain. He told Variety: “Churchill was able to write the history of that period afterwards. It’s all very easy to look back at history and see what you want to see. But at the time, I believe Chamberlain followed the right path. He tried to prevent war. He tried to appease Hitler and got an agreement with Hitler.

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

Meir Y. Soloveichik is the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City and the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.
that he would go no further. That was a canny thing
to do because once Hitler did go further, he was able
to say to the country, this man is not to be trusted and
we're going to have to fight him. I think Chamberlain
should be praised for his pragmatic behavior. We
shouldn't view the Munich Agreement simply as the
appeasement of a weak man who was fooled by Hitler.
It's the wrong way to look at it."

The only problem with this assertion is that it
is preposterously false, and we know this because of
what the film deliberately omits. Its director is Chris-
tian Schwochow, who worked on The Crown, and he
brings to life the look and feel of the summit and Brit-
ain in the 1930s as well. But what the movie does not
show us is the one historical scene that proves conclusiv-
ely that its thesis is false. That moment came when
Chamberlain stood on the balcony of Buckingham Pal-
ace clutching his agreement in hand and compared himself to Benjamin
Disraeli, who had returned from the
Congress of Berlin in 1878 where he
truly had achieved a peaceable solu-
tion to a raging territorial conflict
in Europe: “My good friends, this is
the second time in our history that
there has come back from Germany
to Downing Street peace with honor.
I believe it is peace for our time.”

If Chamberlain had not truly
believed at the moment that he had
made peace with Hitler—as the aide's remark at the
eend of the movie suggests—would he have ever said
such a thing? If Chamberlain had only been cannily
buying time to arm Britain against Hitler, would he
have defined his own legacy with such a comparison?
And if the film truly believes what it asserts about
Chamberlain, why would it cut the most famous mo-
ment in the Munich story? Can there be any reason
other than its inconvenience, the fact that it directly
and explicitly contradicts its entire thesis?

Chamberlain clearly did believe that he had
made peace with Hitler, as did the English elite who
cheered him in Parliament when he returned. And we
must therefore understand why Churchill saw what so
many others missed. The most interesting character
in Munich is an aide to Hitler who as a student was
enthusiastic about the “new Germany” and then be-
comes revolted by it. The role is based on Adam von
Trott, who later attempted to assassinate Hitler. In the
movie, it is the Nazis’ treatment of the Jews that wakes
this young man to the danger posed by Hitler. This
ironically highlights what is elided in the film. As An-
drew Roberts has noted, the Anglo elite refused to fully
face up to the horrors of Hitlerism because many of
them cared so little for the fate of the Jews of Germany.

There is a reason, Roberts notes, that Churchill
saw what his countrymen did not: “Churchill's philo-
Semitism, so rare on the Tory benches, was invaluable
in allowing him to see sooner than anyone else the
ture nature of the Nazi regime.” This, Roberts writes,
further highlights what set Churchill apart: “Despite
being the son of a chancellor of the Exchequer and
the grandson of a duke, he was a contrarian and an
outsider. He even refused to subscribe to the clubland
anti-Semitism that was a social glue for much of the
Respectable Tendency, but instead was an active Zion-
ist. The reason his contemporaries saw him as
profoundly perverse is because he truly was.”

Jews therefore have a special stake in seeing that
the depiction of Munich and its aftermath are true and
correct. This does not mean that a
statesman must always prefer war
to the alternative; Churchill him-
self famously opined that “it is bet-
ter to jaw-jaw than to war-war.” But
one central lesson of Munich—the
conference, not the movie—is that
it is essential to recognize when
evil exists, and it is precisely in this area that
Chamberlain failed so profoundly.

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Commentary

when, after the brutal murder of Israel's athletes by
terrorists, the Olympics went on as normal with the in-
ternational community evincing little concern. We are
therefore especially obligated by history to focus on,
and celebrate, the heroes in history who understood
the motivations of evil men when so few did.

Upon learning of Churchill's death, Leo Strauss
delivered an impromptu tribute during his University
of Chicago seminar. While watching a film in which
Churchill does not appear, and that valorizes the
appeasers, I thought again of Strauss's words: "We have
no higher duty, and no more pressing duty, than to
remind ourselves and our students, of political great-
ness, human greatness, of the peaks of human excel-
ence. For we are supposed to train ourselves and oth-
ers in seeing things as they are, and this means above
all in seeing their greatness and their misery, their
excellence and their vileness, their nobility and their
triumphs, and therefore never to mistake mediocrity,
however brilliant, for true greatness.”

This is why Munich: The Edge of War must be
recognized as a work of moral and artistic mendacity
and mediocrity.\[4]
PRESIDENT BIDEN is running out of time. He has until November 8 to improve both his own political standing and public attitudes toward the Democratic Party. Otherwise, his tenuous congressional majorities—222–212 in the House of Representatives and 50–50 in the Senate—will disappear. Every morning brings him another reminder of his dilemma. Every morning brings him one step closer to what's shaping up to be the biggest political shellacking in more than a decade.

The odds are not in Biden's favor. Historical precedent is against him. Only twice in the last century has the president's party gained seats in its first midterm. Both situations were unique. In 1934, FDR's Democrats benefited from an enormous amount of support for the New Deal. In 2002 George W. Bush's Republicans gained from the surge in patriotism and hawkishness after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Public admiration for the leadership styles of both presidents was visible in their high job-approval ratings. That goodwill translated into gains for their parties. There is no parallel today.

On the contrary: Biden's numbers drag his party down. A president's job approval is highly correlated with his party's performance in off-year elections. As I write in early February, Biden's job approval is 11 points underwater in the FiveThirtyEight.com average of polls. According to the Gallup organization, Biden's average first-year approval rating ranked second-to-last among post–World War II presidents. The only president with worse numbers during his first year was Donald Trump, who lost 42 House seats in 2018. The average loss by a president whose approval rating is under 50 percent is 37 House seats. Biden can afford to lose five. In the Senate, he can't lose any.

The electorate's negative attitude toward Biden extends to his party. It is rare for Republicans to lead the congressional generic ballot. But that is what they have been doing since last November, according to the FiveThirtyEight.com polling average. The two-point GOP lead is slim. It is also durable. And it's been growing since the beginning of this year.

It is also unusual for Republicans to lead in party identification. Typically, Republicans run behind Democrats in party ID. They win majorities by leveraging support among independents. In January, however, the Gallup organization released a stunning finding: When Americans were asked to make a binary choice between Republicans and Democrats, Republicans held a five-point lead in party identification. That is the GOP's greatest advantage since the first quarter of 1995, when Republicans took control of the House for the first time in 40 years.

Then there is money. It is not dispositive in politics. Plenty of candidates outraise their opponents but don't win. The best example of this limitation is former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, who spent $1 billion of his own money in the 2020 Democratic
presidential primary. All he had to show for it was five delegates from American Samoa.

What money does tell you is who donors believe will win. Now dollars are flowing to Republicans. Take the political action committees (PACs). Unlike candidates, PACs are allowed to raise and spend an unlimited amount of money. And Republican-aligned PACs outraised their Democratic counterparts by $25 million during the last six months of 2021. Republican-aligned PACs begin 2022 with over $30 million more on hand than Democratic PACs. The cash hoard is a gauge of Republican donor enthusiasm for the midterm campaign.

Another measure of GOP excitement is found in polling data that show Republicans are more enthusiastic about the election than Democrats by double digits. Conservative energy is evident in the raucous school-board meetings denouncing critical race theory (CRT), remote learning, and mandatory masking. Glenn Youngkin's come-from-behind win in the Virginia governor's race last year fed Republicans' expectations of victory.

Partisan enthusiasm is a zero-sum game. The better Republicans feel about their chances, the more pessimistic Democrats become. Want proof? At this writing, 29 House Democrats have announced their retirements. That number isn’t a ceiling. It's a floor.

“The red wave is coming. Period. End of discussion,” GOP strategist Corry Bliss told the New York Times recently. Times reporters Blake Hounshell and Leah Askarinam searched for reasons Bliss might be wrong. They came up with seven potential obstacles to a Republican landslide: high turnout among Democrats, a return of normalcy, a winning communications strategy, favorable gerrymanders, backlash against aOCRs, a return of normalcy, a winning communications strategy, and that the Afghanistan withdrawal was an “extraordinary success.”

The better Republicans feel about their chances, the more pessimistic Democrats become. Want proof? At this writing, 29 House Democrats have announced their retirements. That number isn’t a ceiling. It’s a floor.

That Biden should ignore his campaign pledge and consider “all possible nominees.” Even if Republicans on the Senate Judiciary Committee act obnoxiously while questioning the nominee—a distinct possibility—the hearings will be a distant memory by Election Day. Voters are more likely to remember promises that Biden made but did not keep: that he would “shut down the virus,” that inflation would be “temporary,” and that the Afghanistan withdrawal was an “extraordinary success.”

At the beginning of this year, longtime Democratic strategist James Carville appeared on Meet the Press to offer his party advice. “Just quit being a whiny party,” Carville said, “and get out there and fight and tell people what you did, and tell people the exact truth.” Carville was as feisty—and as wrong—as ever. People know the exact truth of what Joe Biden has done. That’s why his party is in trouble. 

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ON A MILD October night in 1962, a frightened housewife, eight months pregnant, climbed into bed in Yonkers, New York, with her two-year-old daughter. Her husband was at work on the West Coast and not with his family on what she felt certain would be the last night of their lives. Laying down in the dark holding her child, she cried and prayed until sleep overtook her.

Morning came and they were both still alive, not incinerated in bed as she had feared after President Kennedy shocked

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the nation with his televised address on the Cuban missile crisis the night before.

I was born five weeks later. Days before my first birthday, Kennedy was shot to death in Dallas. By the time I started kindergarten on Long Island, nearly 30,000 American GIs had been killed in Vietnam. I learned to read in Mrs. Bobrowitz's first-grade class the same year Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated; race riots tore apart Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Chicago, and other cities the summer before I started second grade. My elementary-school years were marked by levels of domestic unrest and political violence that in retrospect stagger the imagination. There were more than 1,900 domestic bombings in 1972 alone. Airplane hijackings were common. My dad flew for American Airlines.

My parents made no attempt that I'm aware of to shield me from the turbulent events of my childhood years. I thumbed the New York Daily News every morning after checking the Mets box score; I plucked Newsday out of the mailbox when I came home from school. The television was rarely turned off in our home. I watched Eyewitness News at 6 p.m. and, once I was allowed to stay up late, again at 11. It became a forgone conclusion that I would someday work in the news business after I had stayed up all night mesmerized by Jim McKay's coverage of the Black September terrorist attack on Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics the summer I was nine. Vietnam stretched far enough into my middle-school years that I wondered whether it would be over before I was old enough to be drafted.

In short, I grew up understanding that the world could be a dangerous place of unpredictable menace.

But I was not tyrannized by this knowledge. I went to school, played unsupervised in the street, and had blanket permission to range widely on my bike, far from my neighborhood, provided I was home when the streetlights came on. Adults were not omnipresent as they tend to be in children's lives today, but they seemed in charge and mostly competent. I also knew one thing with certainty about my country, reinforced by my parents and teachers and in the media and culture at large: We were the good guys.

The mental landscape of American childhood is very different today. By any reasonable measure, the world is safer and more stable than at any time in living memory. Adults could hardly be more active in children's lives, but at the same time we seem less inclined to play a reassuring role. This is particularly true in schools, where curricula and school culture seem nearly to revel in the bad and the broken, suggesting to children that they have suffered the great misfortune to have been born into a country that is racist to its core, whose founding documents were lies when written, and where democracy is hanging by a thread. Not that it matters, since we are just a few short years away from irreversible climate catastrophe, all but certain to render the world a spent and burned-out husk by the time they are grown. Neither is it a given that American children will internalize the idea that their country is a force for good in the world or an engine of freedom and prosperity. In fact, quite the opposite.

Forget adult competence. Children are told, sometimes explicitly in school and in the broader culture, that the world is counting on them for deliverance from problems grown-ups heedlessly created and have proven incapable of solving. In 2019, Time magazine named 16-year-old climate activist Greta Thunberg the youngest "person of the year" in its history. A group of Parkland, Florida, high-school gun-control activists topped the magazine's list of the world's most influential people. The article praising their efforts
was written by Barack Obama.

Worst of all, this pedagogy of the depressed—America the Problematic—is thought to be a virtue among professional educators who view it as a mark of seriousness and sophistication. We want children to grapple with “honest history” starting in elementary school and to discover the power of their voices by writing authentic essays about their personal problems. Small wonder, then, that children are more depressed and medicated than ever before. A half-century of psychological research indicates that our beliefs about the world shape behavior and our sense of well-being. Whether one views the world as good or bad, safe or dangerous, enticing or dull, is correlated with outcomes such as life satisfaction or depression. We may think that we are doing children a good service by being “real” with them, refusing to spare them from the unpleasant facts of the tired world they will soon inherit, thus inspiring them to seize the day and set the world right. But strong evidence is emerging that we are mostly succeeding in creating a generation of overwhelmed young people paralyzed into learned helplessness.

It can no longer be questioned—or avoided—that America’s children are in the middle of a serious and alarming mental-health crisis. In October 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics declared the state of child and adolescent mental health “a national emergency.” Visits to hospital emergency rooms for suspected suicide attempts among adolescents grew by 31 percent in 2020 over the year before. In February and March of 2021, visits for suspected suicide attempts for girls ages 12–17 jumped 51 percent compared with the same time period in 2019 prior to Covid.

The crisis, however, predates the pandemic. Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, in their book *The Coddling of the American Mind*, point to 2011 as the start of a measurable national rise in anxiety and depression among teenagers and young adults, citing the rapid spread of smartphones and social media a few years earlier as the likely culprit behind a sharp rise in mental illness and suicide. More screen time is also associated with fewer hours spent on sports and exercise, attending religious services, reading books, doing homework, and in-person social interactions, all of which correlate with lower rates of depression.

School is only one input in a child’s psychic landscape. But educators seem doggedly determined to validate and normalize the depressive forces in children’s lives, rather than resist them or offer a counter-narrative. Consider the impossibly bleak world of recent young adult (YA) literature. To be sure, dark children’s stories are not new. From the horror of Grimm’s fairy tales to the morbid humor of Roald Dahl’s books, authors have long had the impulse to make fear safe for children. But “socially aware” young-adult fiction of more recent vintage demonstrates a fascination with adult themes of tragedy and dysfunction that borders on fetishization.

The bestselling and most widely assigned young-adult books of the past 20 years include *Thirteen Reasons Why*, later made into a Netflix series, which has been accused of glorifying suicide (the title refers to the reasons why a high school girl killed herself) and features scenes of drug use and sexual abuse; and *The Hate U Give*, also a cinematic success, which centers on the shooting of an unarmed black youth by a police officer. The bildungsroman novel *Perks of Being a Wallflower* addresses themes of drug use, child molestation, and post-traumatic stress disorder; *Vigilante* is about a high-school senior’s gang rape. The plot of the wildly popular *Hunger Games* trilogy features children fighting to the death to entertain the population of a decadent successor regime to the United States. The bestselling books for teens since Harry Potter, the se-
ries ushered in an era of dystopian, violent young adult fiction. But this fog of depression and pathology was already sufficiently familiar to readers of contemporary YA lit that by 2004, Sonya Sones published a verse novel for teens knowingly titled One of Those Hideous Books Where the Mother Dies.

“It is difficult to understand why educators would so determinedly insist on immersing students in an unsavory worldview, portraying life in terms of its anomalies and unorthodoxies, as if there's something wrong with you if there's nothing wrong with you,” wrote Steve Salerno, nonfiction author and essayist, in a 2018 Wall Street Journal op-ed critical of the depressing cast of contemporary YA literature. But normalizing the pathological is precisely the point. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) defends the “power of young adult literature to depict the world honestly.” If parents have misgivings about its unrelenting bleakness NCTE provides “talking points” for teachers, including that YA lit “gives teens honest stories,” guides them in everyday living, and “can be used to spark teens’ critical consciousness.”

If it is news to you that sparking a critical consciousness is a goal of K–12 public education, you have never been to a school of education. It is a principal tenet of Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed, among the most frequently assigned books in teacher-prep programs in colleges of education, and the urtext in the dark turn of education thought and practice over the last several decades. For Freire, the starting point of education is not sharing the best that has been thought and said, it’s the learner’s life situation. Liberating the masses from “systemic inequity” requires dismantling institutions and systems that “dehumanize both the oppressor and the oppressed.” This frame, the struggle between oppressors and the oppressed (reliably framed as a binary), has been a constant theme in American education for decades, but it burst into public consciousness only recently with debates over the prevalence (or putative absence) of critical race theory in K–12 education. It has been observed, not inaccurately, that if your child is being taught critical race theory, they’re in law school, not elementary school. But this obfuscation belies the degree to which critical theory—the belief that teaching should challenge students to “read the world” by examining power structures and inequality—deeply informs contemporary education thought and practice. Mike Gonzales and Lindsey Burke of the Heritage Foundation state the tension succinctly. “Simply put, Critical Theory amounts to an unremitting attack on all of America’s norms and traditions,” they write in National Review.

It is “the main philosophical school in the identity politics of today.”

Readers unfamiliar with the folkways of American education, teacher training, and colleges of education may well wonder how an obscure Brazilian Marxist became one of American education's most influential theorists, how developing “critical consciousness” became an explicit goal of its teachers, and how the methods and mindsets of those charged with providing a core government function—educating the nation’s children—drifted into an oppositional relationship with the institutions, traditions, and norms of a nation whose taxpayers pay for its existence and continued support. It is an excellent and largely unasked question.

The defiant relationship of American education to its host is not necessarily an explicitly political project; there is no reason to believe that a substantial share of our 3.7 million teachers are sub-rosa revolutionaries. However, the view of America as problematic echoes the sentiments of progressive elites who are politically invested in a dim view of the United States, downplay its ideals and accomplishments, and believe the country to be in dire need of radical reform. Teachers are measurably more left-leaning than the population as a whole, so it is not surprising that these views would seep into education thought and practice. It would be surprising if they didn’t.

A Pew Research Center survey of U.S. adults conducted last year shows that about half (52 percent) of Americans say the U.S. is “one of the greatest countries, along with some others,” while fewer than one in four (23 percent) say “there are other countries that are better than the U.S.” The share of adults who say there are other countries better than the U.S. “is higher than it was a decade ago, with most of the increase coming among Democrats,” Pew reported. However, the most recent graduates of America’s schools, ages 18–29, hold the dimmest views, with 42 percent saying there are other countries better than the U.S. A mere 12 percent of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents think their country “stands above all other countries in the world,” a figure that drops to a miniscule 5 percent among 18- to 29-years-olds. A solid majority (55 percent) of the youngest Democrats and left leans agree that “other countries are better than the U.S.” This, too, is not a surprise. Advocates may sentimentally invoke the idea of public education as the indispensable, democratic engine of fellow feeling and common ground, but children are increasingly likely to learn that the goal of their education is not to prepare them to build a more perfect union, but to dismantle it.
UR earliest thinkers on public education held notions about its role that seem deeply anachronistic by contemporary standards and might even offend many of today’s teachers. The famous remark attributed to Benjamin Franklin about our form of government—“A republic, Madam, if you can keep it”—resonated precisely because of its ominous suggestion that we would prove incapable of doing so. E.D. Hirsch Jr.’s 2009 book *The Making of Americans* noted that “this anxious theme runs through the writings of all our earliest thinkers about American education.” They were aware of the historical instability of republics and saw common schooling as the only path to create the virtuous, civic-minded citizens critical to social cohesion and national survival. “The school would be the institution that would transform future citizens into loyal Americans. It would teach common knowledge, virtues, ideals, language, and commitments,” Hirsch explained.

Early education theorists such as Benjamin Rush, Noah Webster, and Horace Mann would undoubtedly be shocked to see today’s American public education evince obvious discomfort with these values, holding them at arms’ length, and even seeing virtue in opposing them.

Civic education, the long-forgotten founding purpose of American public schooling, has morphed into a form that older Americans will no longer recognize. Learning how a bill becomes law and about the three branches of government is seen as passive and inauthentic. Your father’s government class has yielded to “action civics,” which also reflects a view of America as a collection of problems to be solved—by children, of course.

Harvard professor Meira Levinson, among the most prominent proponents of action civics, has described it as “the gold standard of guided experiential civic education,” designed to create “an engaged citizenry capable of effective participation in the political process, in their communities, and in the larger society,” she wrote in her 2012 book, *No Citizen Left Behind*. The point is not for students to learn civics, but to *do* civics. Conservatives detect more than a whiff of a leftist agenda in action civics, but its flaws run deeper than the suspicion that its goal is training junior activists to fight for progressive causes. Proponents argue they are merely encouraging children to “exercise power and control over their own lives” as part of their education and upbringing. But such lofty sentiments seldom reflect the realities of classroom practice or its outcomes.

A viral video not long ago captured an exchange between California senator Dianne Feinstein and students, some quite young, insisting that “our earth is literally dying” and seeking her support for the Green New Deal. “Some scientists have said that we have 12 years to turn this around,” one child says on the video. “Well, it’s not going to get turned around in 10 years,” Feinstein calmly responds, explaining that the Green New Deal has no chance of passage in the Senate without Republican votes. “I’ve been doing this for 30 years and I know what I’m doing.” When she tries to describe her own plan, the kids are unprepared to respond. “But we’re the people who voted for you,” a 16-year-old tells the senator, forgetting she was too young to cast a ballot. “You’re supposed to listen to us. That’s your job!”

The awkward exchange is not “action civics,” it’s theater. The students learned their lines by rote with no real understanding of government or politics, and Feinstein refused to play her assigned role as the indulgent elder, praising children for their engagement and pretending to be moved by their activism. The environmental group that organized the awkward exchange later called Feinstein smug and disrespectful. The
senator was playing a different role, one the kids needed but never had: a civics teacher.

When education becomes activism, it dwells exclusively in the bad and the broken; at least tacitly it encourages children to see their community and country as nothing more than a collection of problems to be solved, with none of the virtues and blessings of citizenship. Fair-minded people can see that gratitude for what works and outrage at what’s not working are equally important in a well-functioning civil society. But when only the latter is emphasized, it creates in the minds of students the impression that their country is reflexively antagonistic to their interests: What we have, what we have been given, and what some may seek to preserve is wrong, unjust, and must be dismantled, root and branch. If children view their country as mostly or entirely hostile to their well-being, they cannot help but get the sense that there is nothing worth protecting and preserving. It should not be a controversial notion to say that public education must proceed from a moral commitment, grounded in optimism and, yes, patriotism. You must love something before you seek to change it. It is suicidal to think public education should have as its object the dismantling of the institutions and ideals that birthed it in the first place.

There are worrisome hints that this is all a little too much for many young people to bear. The evidence of an accelerating mental health crisis is troubling enough. But a bracing essay published by Yuval Levin at The Dispatch late last year hints at the emergence of a quiet crisis of despair that is changing the nature of social breakdown in America. We have long tended to think of the greatest threats to social order and human flourishing as unbridled desire for pleasure, wealth, and status. As parents, we fear that our children might derail their lives in reckless pursuit of those things, so we steer them toward the moderating influence of faith, education, fulfilling work, and stable marriages.

But in Levin’s telling, the challenges to America’s social order lately seem “less like exorbitant human desires driving people’s lives out of control and more like an absence of energy and drive leaving people languishing and enervated.” It is easy to look at declining rates of divorce or teen pregnancy and mislead ourselves into thinking that disorder is waning. But, Levin pointed out, there are fewer divorces because there are fewer marriages; fewer out-of-wedlock births because fertility rates are declining generally. “If social dysfunction is essentially a breakdown of discipline—if the core social problem is unruliness—then American life is getting better,” he concludes. “But that case is unpersuasive because the greatest virtues of social order are not functions of its ability to restrain commotion or even to empower choice but of its capacity to enable human flourishing....And we are finding now that there is more than one way to be unhappy.”

The “disordered passivity” Levin detects represents “more fundamental challenges to flourishing because they strike deeper and earlier than the dangers of unruliness.” This places a particular burden on schools to address the problem, not to admire or indulge it. When a child’s education dwells too much in darkness, when the problems of the world are not only caused by adult ineptness and indifference but are placed on children’s shoulders to bear and resolve, common sense suggests it can only contribute to the passivity Levin identifies. “The hallmark emotion of depression is hopelessness, and it’s on a global scale,” agrees Christine Sefin, a therapist and former professor of clinical psychology. “That continuous repetitive message—‘There’s no reason to care because it’s all messed up. I’m
always gonna feel guilty that I'm white, or I'm always gonna feel badly that my people were slaves or oppressed, there's no way out, there's no light—that message is going to throw people into depression.”

The teaching profession, however, seems to have reached a different conclusion over the past decade, elevating “social and emotional learning” (SEL) to a central concern of public education, giving it coequal status with academic achievement. The rise of SEL includes a tendency to borrow ideas and tactics from therapy, psychology, social work, and even the clergy, with teaching and education increasingly coming to resemble those fields. But acting as unlicensed and poorly trained therapists carries the risk of pathologizing childhood, encouraging educators to view children—particularly children from disadvantaged subgroups—not as capable and resilient individuals, but as traumatized and fragile. It also reinforces, at least tacitly, that childhood is a minefield for children to navigate en route to taking their place in a diminished country and an endangered world.

There is a fine line to be walked here. Few would argue that children should grow up in a protective bubble, cosseted and coddled, insulated from history and the realities of life. It would be impossible in our information and social-media-saturated age. But something is at loose in the land, a change in the weather that has changed how children perceive the world and their place in it. As adults and as educators, we are not merely failing in our responsibility to be a reassuring presence in their lives, we seem perversely determined to normalize and even valorize their despair.

Consider how much has changed in the lives of children, and the signals we give them about the world they inhabit, and their role in it. If Covid had struck 40 or 50 years ago, it’s neither naive nor ahistorical to think that the arrival of vaccines less than a year into a global pandemic would have been framed for schoolchildren as a triumph of science and human ingenuity, and cause for celebration. The middle school two blocks from my New York City apartment is named for Jonas Salk. Today, teachers in a school that honors the man who cured polio treat children as a matter of public policy, as walking hot zones. Teachers in some U.S. cities, even when fully vaccinated, have walked off the job rather than risk contagion. An American child in second grade or younger has never known a single school year uninterrupted by Covid or not conducted under a regime of masking, social distancing, and quarantines.

It’s not hard to imagine the psychic toll this takes on children: The world is deadly and dangerous. I am, myself, a potentially lethal threat to my teachers, my family, and my friends.

This is the world now on offer to our children. It doesn’t matter if our intentions are good, if we see virtue in being honest with children, or seek only to “empower” students to take on and change the world. We have broken childhood. We have succeeded only in creating a generation of children who feel overwhelmed and powerless, lacking in agency, and who are saying to themselves, in effect, “Why bother?”

F ONE IS SEARCHING for green shoots sprouting from this bleak landscape, they are there. We see intriguing hints that parents are more willing than they have been historically to question their long-standing ties to public schools, and they may be searching for more edifying and enriching options for their children’s education—though at present it is nearly impossible to disentangle that impulse from frustration with the inability or unwillingness of school leaders simply to keep their buildings reliably open for in-person instruction.
For decades, polls have tended to show that Americans hold dim views of public education at large, even as they regard the schools their own children attend as exceptions to the rule. The pandemic, however, has put all of this in play by placing local schools under a microscope to an unprecedented degree. Remote instruction and quarantines have served to pry open the black box of the classroom, with schools beamed into millions of homes via Zoom. That visibility has in many instances shaken parents’ confidence in the content and quality of instruction that their children are receiving in “good” local schools.

Parents have complained to school boards, but they’re also voting with their feet. Late last year, National Public Radio gathered head-count data from more than 600 school districts in nearly two dozen states and found a decline of 3 percent in public-school enrollment compared with pre-pandemic levels—including about 50,000 students gone missing in New York City; 26,000 in Los Angeles; and 25,000 in Chicago. All told, about 1.5 million students have exited the traditional public education system. A significant number, perhaps a majority, are low-income students whose relationship to formal education was already tenuous. But the Census Bureau reports a greater than threefold increase in the rate of homeschooling, from 3.3 percent pre-pandemic to 11.4 percent in the fall of 2020. Private-school enrollment is up, and Catholic schools are adding students after decades of decline. There is also burgeoning interest in classical academies and charter schools. The Great Hearts Academy charter-school network in Arizona and Texas reported over 13,000 students on their waiting list last year—an average of more than 400 students for each of its 30 schools.

These data may mostly be a reflection of new patterns of mobility driven by Covid, or a search for more predictable options than on-again, off-again district schools. But at the same time, at least some of the churn seems to be a response to long-festering dissatisfaction with the status quo in education and an inchoate sense that something is off about it, and that it’s all getting worse, not better.

For decades, the price of peace between the political left and right in education policy and practice has been to narrow our focus and expectations of public schools to their measurable outcomes, meaning test scores. In the main, it’s been unsuccessful, but even more significant, it’s been unsatisfying. Decades of technocratic meddling have too often reduced schooling to a dry regimen of reading, math, and not much else, the loaf leavened by endless rounds of test prep. However critical and worthwhile the impulse to reverse the national embarrassment of poor test scores, the unintended consequence has been to make schooling less engaging and interesting for students. Grafting a social-engineering agenda onto that and placing race at the heart of the enterprise have proven no more satisfying or successful, and even more politically volatile than testing.

In the final analysis, American education needs nothing as badly as a reset—a rethinking of the social contract between teachers, parents, and other stakeholders in schools. Education’s highest object is to nourish the soul and inspire human flourishing, not to be a hobbyhorse for either ambitious technocrats or social-justice activists. Even if students or their parents can’t always articulate it, there has been in recent years a nagging sense, as manifested in school culture and curriculum, that we lost the plot. We’ve failed to ask the fundamental question: What is school for?

We may come to see in retrospect that the pandemic was a trip wire, forcing the question onto the table—and countless kitchen tables—in ways that might not have occurred absent the pandemic. A large and growing number of Americans are either seeking or at least open to alternatives to the cultural habit of traditional public education as we have long known it. They want something different for their children.
The Commencement Address That Can Never Be Delivered

Was it worth it?

By Joseph Epstein

Joseph Epstein has written for Commentary since 1963.
My hope is that you will match up my observations with your own experience in college and determine thereby whether you have got your time and money’s worth.

to the politically correct, I don’t believe they are any longer all that honorable. I myself have no advanced degrees, but only a B.A. *in absentia* from the University of Chicago (While in the Army, I took my final exam on a pool table at Fort Hood, Texas, in 1959). While at the University of Chicago, you should know, I received no A’s and, best I can remember, more C’s than B’s. I was never much of a student, and no professor I had during my student days has remembered me on meeting later in life. So what, you may wonder, qualifies me to deliver your commencement address?

Nothing, really, but a willingness to avoid the sonorous platitudes usually hauled out on such occasions as college graduations and a readiness to tell the truth, as I see it, about the real value of a contemporary university education. My hope is that you will match up my observations with your own experience in college over the past four years and determine thereby whether you have got your time and money’s worth.

Some years ago, a man named Paul Goodman, a 1930s radical who became a guru of sorts for the rebellious students of the 1960s, claimed that what graduating college chiefly demonstrated was the ardor to be in the game. So great was this ardor that young men and women would do anything—write hopeless papers on the Reformation, memorize the irregular verbs of foreign languages they were unlikely ever to use, study subjects of no possible interest to anyone but their dry-as-dust professors—to be able to play. The main thing was to get that degree, that magical credential that would get them a job, allowing them to become cogs, however small and obscure, in the great relentlessly humming machine of capitalism.

Paul Goodman was never my guru. As Winston Churchill called “democracy the worst form of government that has ever been tried—except for all the others,” I believe the same can be said for capitalism: that it is the worst form of economy that has ever been tried—except for all the others. Still, yet, but, nevertheless, and however, Goodman had a point: Working four years at what may seem irrelevant subjects to get a respectable job does seem a bit much to ask.

Ah, but you may answer, college was great. “I made many new friends, I had many good times, I’ll draw for years off the many swell memories I acquired during my college years.” I wouldn’t argue with any of this. I would only ask, Was it worth it—worth the time, the money, the often useless effort.

ALLOW ME to present you with my first bit of bad news. Your bachelor’s degrees, apart from those in engineering and possibly in accounting, or those you understood all along were mere hurdles you needed to jump to get you into medical or law or business school, may not be the permanent pass-go-and-collect-$200 card you imagined. A recent article in *City Journal* by Kay S. Hymowitz argues, alas all too persuasively, that a bachelor’s degree may not have the same value in the job market that it once did. Everyone has heard of grade inflation, but we now appear to be undergoing a phenomenon even more insidious—namely, degree inflation.

The college degree, Hymowitz writes, “is declining in status: postgraduate degrees are now where the real action is. The coveted B.A. from all but the most elite schools has become a yawn, a Honda Civic in a Tesla world.” She adds that “a master’s degree is the new bachelor’s degree” and that many “employers look at applicants with a bachelor’s degree as second class.” More depressing still, Hymowitz goes on to show the high expense (often charged off as student debt) of acquiring postgraduate degrees and how even many of those with such degrees wind up taking jobs as “parking-lot attendants, bartenders, salespeople.” She quotes an economist named Richard Vedder noting that we can look forward to the day when “a master’s degree in ‘janitorial studies’ will be needed to get a job as a custodian.”

So much, then, for the value of your college degree insuring your getting a good job. What your degree can do, I suppose, is shore up your sense of self-worth. I recall telling my oldest son that I hoped he could arrange to get himself into what the world considers one of the better colleges. He would likely find that it wasn’t all that good—what, after all, does the world know about higher education?—but at least he wouldn’t spend the rest of his life wondering how things might have turned out for him if only he had gone to a supposedly good school.

My son managed to get into Stanford, which, along with Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and perhaps Chicago, passes the good-school test. Yet these schools,
What students were often missing was true passion for curiosity about the world and what is important in it. The good student just wanted to get on and up in the world.

too, have in recent years lowered their standards, not their admission but their intellectual standards, by giving way to the cries for multiculturalism, political correctness, and artificially created diversity. The reputation of these schools now chiefly exists in the realm of snobbery. Unfortunately, the snobbery works—that is, a Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford graduate is likely to have an advantage in the job market over a possibly superior person from, say, the University of Southern Illinois. Owing to their snobbish cachet, these once elite universities have now become less schools than brands—designer schools, if you will (and why wouldn’t you?). A wag I know—me, actually—feels they should change their names, Harvard becoming Armani; Yale, Ralph Lauren; Princeton, Ferragamo; and Stanford, Gucci.

I hear rumblings in my audience. Was that a guffaw? Did someone call out nonsense? Perhaps it was a good student who did so. Which brings me to that curious figure, “the good student.” My own definition of the good student is someone who psyches out what the professor wants and then has the skill to give it to him. Some people are exceedingly good at school, but not all that good at anything else. A high IQ, I have come to believe, measures chiefly the ability to deal with matters—quantum mechanics, organic chemistry, analytical geometry—at a high level of abstraction, but often with little more. A few of the doperi est people I have known had through-the-roof IQs. I have also come to believe that the chief thing high scores on the SAT reveals is the ability to score high on the SAT, and not all that much more.

Most people work hard at school for one or another form of approval: when very young for the approval of their parents, later for the approval of teachers, then of admissions departments at universities, later still of future employers. Many exceedingly intelligent people, though, are bored royal blue by schoolwork. Consider these certifiable geniuses who, it turns out, were not all that good at school: Pascal, Tolstoy, Henry James, Paul Valéry. Add, closer to our own day, Steve Jobs and Bill Gates: The former dropped out of Reed College his freshman year; the latter dropped out of Harvard, feeling, apparently, that it had little or nothing to offer him. Often people who are good at school never leave and themselves become professors. And so, as the disc jockeys say, the beat goes on.

I was a professor myself—a lecturer, actually—for 30 years at Northwestern University. As a university teacher, I found myself less than impressed with the good student. Some resembled well-trained dogs. Suggest a topic, “T. S. Eliot and Anglo-Catholicism”—go get it boy!—and they return with A papers in their mouths. Some among them had straightforward enough motives: All those A’s would get them into law or business schools, the next rung up on the ladder of their dreams, and that is fair enough. (At the beginning of a course I taught on Joseph Conrad, a student came up to ask whether I gave many A’s. The reason he asked, he said, is that he hoped to go to med school and couldn’t afford many grades below A. I told him I gave “some A’s.” He never turned up for the second day of the course.) I frequently sensed something missing in the good student. What was often missing was true passion not alone for learning but for curiosity about the world and what is truly important in it. The good student just wanted to get on and up in the world.

I HAVE BEEN degrading much in contemporary undergraduate education, yet I must now report that my own college experience at the University of Chicago—which was more than 50 years ago, and thus not all that contemporary—was a turning point in my own life. I had spent the year before attending Chicago at the University of Illinois, where much of my coursework seemed to consist of memorization of the biological phyla, of French vocabulary, and more. Not wishing to fail, I did the work, though I sometimes thought a course in memorizing the telephone book would have been just as valuable as some of my courses at Illinois.

At the University of Chicago, to which I transferred after my freshman year, all this changed. At the center of undergraduate education at the University of Chicago was The College. The College entailed a dozen or so yearlong courses with such bland titles as Humanities I, II, and III, Social Science I, II, and III, History, OMP (standing for Organization, Methods, and Principles), and others. For many years at Chicago, one didn’t major in any subject as an undergraduate, but instead took only the core courses. (Majors were added later, causing the New York Times columnist David Brooks to remark that at the University of Chicago
At the University of Chicago, one’s financial worth did not in any way match one’s true worth. What did was the quality of one’s mind and the way one lived one’s life.

he “majored in history and minored in celibacy.”) No textbooks were used in any of these core courses in The College. Instead of reading about what Tocqueville, Marx, and Freud wrote, one read Tocqueville, Marx, and Freud. Plato and Aristotle were two philosophers whose writings seemed to show up again and again in the various courses. The effect of this was to feel that one was going to the source and not reading another person’s (the textbook writer’s) interpretation of sources. Eschewing textbooks for original works also in time gave a student confidence in his or her ability to read difficult, sometime even abstruse, writers.

No attendance was ever taken at the University of Chicago. One might be assigned papers to write, but they didn’t count toward one’s final grade. Nor do I recall quizzes, sudden or other, of any kind. Everything hinged on one’s performance on the final exam, called the comp, or comprehensive. And this, the comp, was graded not by your teacher but by people from something called the Examiner’s Office, which removed a teacher’s liking or disliking you, or your sucking up to your teacher in the hope of getting a higher grade.

As for the readings, I can recall the intellectual excitement I felt arguing with Karl Marx, fighting to free myself from the persuasiveness of Sigmund Freud, being blown away by the intellectual connections made by Max Weber, admiring without reservation Thucydides. For someone whose most serious reading before the University of Chicago had been The Catcher in the Rye, this was heady stuff.

The reading at the University of Chicago caused a student—this student—to think on a grander scale than he might have done previously. This same reading was designed to force a student to confront the larger questions, among them, What is important in life? What is trivial and can be safely ignored? What is the good life? How, finally, ought I to spend my own life?

If you emerge from your college years with roughly the same point of view with which you began, I wonder if you haven’t missed out on a rewarding college education. I was not sure what I wanted to do with my life when I began at the University of Chicago, but when I emerged, I was fairly certain about what I didn’t want to do with it. To devote my life to money-making, comfort, security, though none of these was to be despised, was no longer good enough. A not-so-hidden agenda behind much that went on at Chicago posited that the great things to do with one’s life were to become an artist (painter, composer, writer), scientist (no mere physician but a research scientist), statesman (none of whom currently existed), and if none of these were possible to become a teacher of artists, scientists, statesmen. To become a billionaire was insufficient. One’s financial worth did not in any way match one’s true worth. What did was the quality of one’s mind and the way one lived one’s life.

I heard several brilliant lecturers at Chicago—and I recall attending poetry readings by T. S. Eliot and Marianne Moore—but had no memorable classroom teachers. Rather it was the general atmosphere of the school that had the greatest effect on me. This atmosphere, one of the utmost seriousness—a T-shirt read “The University of Chicago, Where Fun Goes to Die”—featured models of what an educated person looked like. The school in those days also had an international air, owing to the brilliant German and Italian refugees among its faculty (Fascism’s gift to America). This intellectual style was one I wished to emulate, though I had to do so with care, lest I be labelled a “pseudo-intellectual,” which of course at the outset I suppose I was. But my larger point is that having a model or models of an educated person, which the University of Chicago supplied in abundance, is crucial to becoming oneself. “Unless we have a right notion of what is valuable, of what we mean by success, and of what types of man we admire,” wrote T. S. Eliot in Notes Towards the Definition of Culture, “our reforms of education may go little farther than a multiplication of sanitary school-buildings and a further proliferation of diplomas.”

The educated person is someone whose culture is wider, whose understanding is deeper than the ordinary person’s. He is likely to be disinterested, which is to say impartial, in many of his views, though never chary of taking controversial positions. He steers clear of what the art critic Harold Rosenberg called “the herd of independent minds.” That herd can usually be found in search of fashionable ideas; it tends to travel under the banner of political parties, seeking out the faddish in both art and ideas. The educated person sees through all that fiddle.
More often than most, the educated person is able to see things as they truly are. He or she is, as Henry James advised we all try to be, a person ‘on whom nothing is lost.’

What he sees is nicely captured in a passage in an essay called “Faking It” by the late English philosopher Roger Scruton. In this essay, Scruton takes up the question of how we perceive beauty in art. “We reach beauty through setting our interests aside and letting the work dawn on us,” he writes. “There are many ways of doing this, but art is undeniably the most important, since it presents us with the image of human life—our own life and all it means to us—and asks us to look on it directly, not for what we can take from it but for what we can give to it. Through beauty, art cleans the world of our self-obsession.” Scruton holds that our need for art arises from our moral nature, and he adds: “We can wander through this world, alienated, resentful, full of suspicion and distrust. Or we can find our home here, coming to rest in harmony with others and with ourselves.”

The educated person, in other words, through art, through philosophy, through the contemplation of history, is able to step outside him- or herself and to see the world, unfogged by self-interest or personal obsession. Not always but more often than most, the educated person is able to see things as they truly are. He or she is, as Henry James advised we all try to be, a person “on whom nothing is lost.”

A serious education, then, ought to enable you to do more than get a decent job. Such an education should free you, allowing you to move about the world observing, comparing, understanding what passes before you. Serious education will not reveal life's manifold mysteries to you but makes them more vivid and hence more worthy of contemplation. Education enlightens, which is to say lights up, the world like nothing else, making it simultaneously a richer, more amusing, and interesting place. Perhaps above all, it frees you from the narrow confines of your social class, your nationality, your ethnicity, rendering you a citizen of the world.

Finally, a good college education convinces anyone who has acquired one that he or she is far from educated at the end of college. A good college education reveals above all that education itself is a lifelong endeavor, one never entirely achieved, for there are always more books to read, art works to view, music to listen to, mysteries to consider. I hope this doesn't depress you. No reason it should. What better way, after all, to spend one's days than in the happy pursuit of the gloriously unattainable!
The Extraordinary Terry Teachout

Gone too soon, but what a life

By Bruce Bawer

REGULAR READERS OF Terry Teachout’s blog, About Last Night, knew his place of birth as “Small-town, U.S.A.” In reality, that burg—population roughly 16,000—was Sikeston, Missouri. If Terry, who died unexpectedly on January 13, enjoyed calling it by a generic name, I suppose it’s because the life he’d lived there was, as he remembered it, small-town American boyhood at its idyllic best. His family, about whom I never knew him to breathe a negative word, had been, by his testimony, a gloriously happy one, and if, as Tolstoy maintained, “all happy families are alike in the same way,” then Sikeston might just as well have been Bedford Falls in It’s a Wonderful Life or Grover’s Corners in Terry’s favorite play, Our Town.

In 1991, only three years before he began writing monthly for Commentary, Terry published a charming memoir, City Limits: Memories of a Small-Town Boy, about his Sikeston boyhood. He might gladly have spent his life there, one gathers, except for one thing: He fell helplessly in love with writing and music, with culture and the arts. He played violin in the junior-high-school band, but after hearing jazz, he borrowed a bass from the band room, took it home for the summer, and taught himself how to play it. In his teens, he took the role of the Artful Dodger in a Sikeston Little Theater production of Oliver and performed Hank Williams’s “I Saw the Light” at Sikeston’s First United Methodist Church as part of a local country-music combo.

But much as he enjoyed all this activity, he knew there were places out there where the possibilities for a life centered on culture far outstripped what was on offer in and around Sikeston. At first, he enrolled in St. John’s College in Annapolis, then as now famous for its Great Books program. But deciding after a single semester that he wasn’t yet ready to live that far from home, he transferred to William Jewell College outside Kansas City. He stayed in Kansas City for years, performing in jazz joints and, like Hemingway before him, writing for the Kansas City Star. In what turned out to be another dead end, he went to the University of Illinois to study psychology. But after two years, he relocated to the city where he would spend the rest of his life: New York.

Bruce Bawer’s online work from 2021 is now collected in Peak Woke? (Swamp Fox Editions).

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I met him not long after that. Working first at *Harpers* as an editor and then as an editorial writer at the *Daily News*, which was then a populist big-city paper (and which he would later call “my graduate school for writing”), he organized a salon at which relatively novice writers for the *Wall Street Journal, Commentary, New Criterion*, and other right-leaning publications (and think tanks) could get to know one another. The salon, called “The Vile Body,” met every month for drinks and snacks at the elegant Upper East Side townhouse that was then the headquarters of the Manhattan Institute. Yet for all the panache of the address and the sophistication of the reference to Evelyn Waugh’s novel about dissolve youth—and the Paris-in-the-Twenties feel of the very idea of a “salon”—the idea of forming such a club was that of a neighborly small-town boy who simply felt that relatively like-minded young people working in the same profession in the same city should get to know one another and have the chance to make friends.

Friendship was one of the many things at which Terry was gifted. From “The Vile Body” right up until this past January 4, when we exchanged Facebook messages, I considered Terry one of my closest friends. But I also knew that there were boatloads of people—and the number of them grew like Topsy as the years went by—who felt the same way. As far as I know, he never lost a friend, either. If you’re a politico-literary intellectual type, you eventually start falling out with at least some longtime comrades. But not Terry. He was one “Vile Body” member who decades later was still on amicable terms, I think, with everyone. Case in point: his first marriage. When I first knew him, he was married to the delightful Liz Cullers, a respected voice coach for opera singers. When they divorced, I was surprised (he’d never breathed a word to me against her). When they remained good friends (which they still were at the time of his death), I wasn’t.

That was Terry. Beneath the urbane surface he was the quintessential decent small-town gentleman. He had good manners and always dressed presentably. I don’t remember him ever cursing, even mildly. Or being in a foul mood. Or expressing anger at anybody. Or talking down to a waiter or bartender. Or snubbing someone at a party. By the same token, he had self-respect; he wouldn’t let his kindness be mistaken for weakness or let himself be taken advantage of. He valued his time. Unlike many other writers, newspapermen, and jazz musicians, he wouldn’t hang out and shoot the breeze for hours over endless drinks. (Never mind drugs: I can’t even imagine him smoking pot.) He had a pioneer purposefulness about him. No matter what his social obligations, he had to get up in the morning and get the job done.

When I first knew him, I thought of him mainly as a political writer. During the week, he wrote editorials for the *Daily News*; on weekends he took the train down to Baltimore to research his H.L. Mencken biography at the Enoch Pratt Free Library. For a while there, it felt as if those Baltimore trips would never stop, and indeed, it took 10 years of library work before *The Skeptic* came out in 2002, to terrific reviews. But it turned out he’d just begun rolling up his sleeves—and politics was about to yield, in a very big way, to culture.

In 2003, he became drama critic for the *Wall Street Journal*. Over the following 11 years, even as he kept up his grueling theater-reviewing schedule—traveling every other week to see plays all over the U.S.—he contributed long monthly cultural pieces to *Commentary*; published solid, important biographies of George Balanchine, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington; staged the first of his two plays, *Satchmo at the Waldorf*; and even knocked off libretti for the first three of four operas on which he collaborated with composer Paul Moravec.

It took me a while to realize just what a marvel Terry was. At one point he started going to the New York City Ballet and mentioned that he wanted to make a serious study of dance; next thing you knew, he was an expert. Later, it wasn’t enough for him that theater companies around the country were staging *Satchmo*; he also decided to direct it, and made a side career of that, too. In addition, he became a committed, if small-scale, collector of modern-art pieces, which he displayed proudly on his living-room wall, a.k.a. the Teachout Museum. And he took on other obligations, serving for six years on the National Council on the Arts and accepting heaven knows how many invitations to give lectures.

Terry took on many obligations, serving for six years on the National Council on the Arts and accepting heaven knows how many invitations to give lectures.
At some point I started worrying that Terry never really relaxed. When he did, he put effort into it—finding, for example, some remote house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright that could be rented for a couple of nights. Just hearing about his schedule was exhausting. Why was he always so restless? Of course, to make even a half-decent living as a writer, you can’t be a slouch. But when it came to productivity, Terry was in a class by himself. (Moravec introduced him once as “the hardest-working man in show business.”) Did he feel on some level that his life in New York was a gift for which he was obliged to toil away without surcease? Or was it that he never really lost that newcomer’s excitement at living in the Big Apple and woke up every morning as determined as an adrenaline-soaked tourist to cram as much into the day as possible?

Ultimately, his body rebelled against his workaholic lifestyle. At 44, he was rushed to Lenox Hill Hospital with what he called “an undiagnosed case of work-exacerbated pneumonia.” Five years later, he was readmitted with congestive heart failure. He almost died. On his blog—the first to be started by a print-media arts critic—he declared his unwillingness “to give up without a fight.” He wrote, “I have music to hear, plays to review, paintings to see, etchings to buy and treasure, a book to finish writing, a blog to keep, dozens of friends who claim quite convincingly to love me, and many, many memories, a few dark and desperate, far more full of light. In the last few days alone countless things have happened, small and large, that make me feel on some level that his life in New York was a gift for which he was obliged to toil away without surcease? Or was it that he never really lost that newcomer’s excitement at living in the Big Apple and woke up every morning as determined as an adrenaline-soaked tourist to cram as much into the day as possible? / Where has the time all gone to? / Haven’t done half the things we want to / Oh, well, we’ll catch up some other time.”

Thankfully, he survived that crisis, and life went on. But now, as it happens, he wasn’t alone—and the medical problems were just beginning. Just before his second trip to Lenox Hill, he’d met and fallen in love with a woman named Hilary Dyson, who’d recently been diagnosed with pulmonary hypertension and been given two or three years to live. Her only hope of salvation lay in a lung transplant.

Terry and Hilary married in 2007, and for the next few years they strove to make the most out of the time they had together and the increasing physical limitations under which Hilary labored. After she grew sick enough to be listed for a transplant, there were a number of false alarms—lungs that turned out not to match—and several close calls. Online, Terry apprised their friends of every new development, and from far and near we all followed along anxiously. Finally, in February 2020, Hilary received her long-awaited new lungs. There was a brief moment of exultation and hope. But it didn’t last. The lungs didn’t take. Her system collapsed. I can’t imagine how many people wept when Terry reported her death.

I frankly don’t know how Terry got through the roller coaster of those last couple of years with Hilary—all the while keeping up a busy work schedule—not to mention his cruel and sudden widowerhood. After her passing, many of us shared his fear that he’d never love again. He did manage, in another stunning accomplishment, to write a short, candid, and heartbreaking book (which has yet to be published) about his life with Hilary (it appeared in chrysalis as “My Gallant Gal,” an essay in the June 2020 issue of Commentary). Then, in mid-2021, to everyone’s surprise, Terry, now 65, fell in love again—this time with a woman named Cheril Mulligan. At the end of the year, he gave thanks on his blog for “the return of good fortune to my once-charmed, twice-blessed life…. I rejoice...to tell you that my star has risen again.” He looked forward, he said, to the “surprises [that] await me in 2022.”

Terry’s gratitude for his “good fortune,” both personal and professional, was sincere and lifelong. “I have the best job in the world,” he often declared. And that job, in his view, was to bring pleasure and insight to ordinary readers, never to impress fellow intellectual elites. He took his motto as a critic from a line spoken by Elizabeth Bennet in Pride and Prejudice: “I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good.” It’s no coincidence that his favorite song was the wistful “Some Other Time” from On the Town (music by Leonard Bernstein, lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green): “Where has the time all gone to? / Haven’t done half the things we want to / Oh, well, we’ll catch up some other time.”

For although he could, at first blush, seem the merriest of souls, there was always that constant undercurrent of melancholy, that keen awareness of the ephemeral nature of even life’s most cherished joys. Perhaps that was why he kept moving so fast: He was driven to bask in the light, and keep the darkness at bay, for as long as humanly possible.

Although Terry could seem the merriest of souls, there was always that keen awareness of the ephemeral nature of even life’s most cherished joys.
There Will Be No More Breyers

The day of the liberal pragmatist has passed

By Adam J. White

America has changed radically since 1994. Even so, Stephen Breyer’s departure from the Supreme Court turned out to be strikingly similar to his arrival 27 years ago. Standing with President Biden in the White House in January, Breyer announced his retirement with a paean to pluralism. America is a nation of “more than 330 million people,” he said, “so different in what they think. And yet, they’ve decided to help solve their major differences under law.” That echoed his opening statement in 1994 to Biden and the rest of the Senate Judiciary Committee of which the future president was chairman. In a country full of people “from so many different backgrounds and circumstances, with so many different needs and hopes,” Breyer said then, our Constitution’s purpose “is to help them live together productively, harmoniously, and in freedom.”

Unfortunately for Breyer, the resemblance didn’t end there. The indignities he suffered in his last year on the bench—with Democrats campaigning openly for his retirement and then evidently leaking his decision before he could announce it himself—call to mind the circus that surrounded his appointment to the Court.

In 1994, President Clinton announced Breyer’s selection so abruptly that Breyer himself missed the Rose Garden declaration; only days later did he get a White House welcome, at a follow-up. And though Clinton and Breyer planned to go for a jog before that second event, Clinton wound up taking off without him. “I don’t know where he is,” Clinton told reporters.

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Breyer exuded a love for his country and its institutions, with an absent-minded professor’s charm, from start to finish. And he maintained an admirable degree of humility.

“I thought he was going with me.” Breyer was left behind, and not for the last time.

His best qualities endured throughout his tenure on the Court. He exuded a love for his country and its institutions, with a kind of absent-minded professor’s charm, from start to finish. And he maintained an admirable degree of humility. In recent decades, the Court has seen an interesting trend: Each time a new justice becomes the Court’s senior liberal, he or she suddenly takes on a new character. Harry Blackmun denounced capital punishment’s “machinery of death”; John Paul Stevens became a bulwark of judicial power during the global War on Terror; Ruth Bader Ginsburg became the cultural superstar “RBG.” Yet when Justice Breyer became the Court’s senior liberal, his public persona did not change. Indeed, if anything, Justice Sonia Sotomayor seemed to overshadow him on the national stage. For nearly half of his tenure, Justice Breyer was the Court’s junior justice, which meant he was stuck with the unglamorous chores of taking notes and answering the door during the justices’ private conferences. He wore his lesser status lightly, and then he wore seniority lightly, too.

So he never galvanized progressives, who generally treated him as a letdown. President Clinton already had passed him over once, for Ruth Bader Ginsburg in 1993. A year later, Clinton nominated Breyer only after agonizing about it for more than five weeks. The leaky White House made clear that the president really wanted to pick a friend, Bruce Babbitt, or a fellow Arkansan, Judge Richard Arnold. But Babbitt was politically problematic, and Arnold was ailing with cancer. Also, Senator George Mitchell had already turned it down. So Clinton picked Breyer.

At the first White House event—the one without Breyer—the president spoke glowingly of Babbitt and Arnold. Yet when the discussion turned to the actual nominee, Clinton “sounded subdued and uninspired,” according to the Washington Post’s Ruth Marcus. The “central fact of Clinton’s selection of the 108th justice,” she reported, was that Clinton “did not get exactly what he wanted. Instead, he settled for Breyer as the least risky alternative.”

Today, Democrats are in no mood to settle. With the Supreme Court more amenable than ever to a rule of law anchored in the Constitution’s original meaning, and with Republicans having appointed three more justices since giving the silent treatment to Merrick Garland’s nomination by Barack Obama in 2016, Democrats are openly questioning the Supreme Court’s very legitimacy and threatening to pack the Court.

At the very least, they relish the chance to appoint a justice more to their own liking while they still hold both the White House and the Senate. Years ago, after the Republican-appointed Justice David Souter took a leftward turn, conservatives’ rallying cry became “No More Souters.” Today, Democrats’ message seems to be “No More Breyers,” and they started with Breyer himself.

In essays and op-eds marking the justice’s retirement, a common theme quickly emerged. “The Court Loses Its Chief Pragmatist,” declared the Atlantic. To the Washington Post, Breyer was “a centrist, pragmatic problem-solver.” Harvard’s Noah Feldman declared in Bloomberg that Breyer was “one of the great pragmatists in the court’s history.” And Harvard Law School, where Breyer taught, headlined its encomium, simply, “Pragmatic Justice.”

This, too, harkened back to Breyer’s confirmation hearing, where constitutional scholars testifying on his behalf referred often to his “pragmatism.” But what did that actually mean? When Senator Orrin Hatch asked him about it, Breyer the nominee explained that judges must interpret and apply “a body of rules and institutions and so forth that is supposed to work properly for people.” And, he added, “I would imagine that on the Supreme Court, what I would be bound by is the words, the history, the precedents, the traditions, all of those things which in fact go up to make this great body of institutions.”

Throughout the confirmation hearing, Breyer’s approach was set in contrast to the constitutional originalism that was already ascendant on the Court just years into Antonin Scalia’s and Clarence Thomas’s own tenures on the Court. Indeed, Senator Biden opened the hearings not by discussing Breyer’s jurisprudence, but by describing Scalia’s, and Thomas’s, and Robert Bork’s.

At the second White House nomination event, the one with Breyer, CNN’s Wolf Blitzer put the question bluntly. “There are many liberal Democrats who...
After his first decade on the Court, Breyer undertook to write a series of books describing and defending his jurisprudence more systematically.

have been hoping someone would be named who would serve as a strong counterpoint to Justice Scalia. Do you envisage yourself as someone who can stand up to his more conservative principles and argue the merits of the liberal case effectively and move that Court to a different direction?"

“If I’m confirmed,” Breyer replied, “I envisage myself as a person who will do the best possible job I’m capable of as a justice of the Supreme Court.”

It was the kind of vague circularity that Bill Clinton could appreciate. (“I wish I could answer questions like that,” he chuckled.) And the crowd greeted it with applause. But if anything, his answer made clear that there would be no imminent counter-jurisprudence with the substantive weight or rhetorical punch of Scalia’s and Thomas’s originalism.

To recognize this is not to slight Justice Breyer. He never fashioned himself as a lion of constitutional liberalism and gave no indication that he ever aspired to anything like it. He was a highly respected scholar of administrative law, writing insightful articles and a major casebook on the relationship between judicial courts and administrative agencies. And he wrote thoughtful books on regulatory policy, such as Breaking the Vicious Circle: Toward Effective Risk Regulation (1993) and Regulation and Its Reform (1982). He applied his reform-minded approach as counsel to the Senate Judiciary Committee, and at the Justice Department’s Antitrust Division, before his 1980 appointment to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit. In none of these roles, however, did he venture a comprehensive jurisprudential alternative to Scalia’s.

Yet once Breyer and Scalia became colleagues, it was impossible to avoid the contrast. Indeed, the two friends embraced it, often making joint appearances to debate their respective approaches.

But mostly they expressed their differences in judicial opinions, where Justice Breyer was as reliably liberal as Scalia was conservative. Virtually every issue that divides justices—abortion, guns, affirmative action, federalism, and the rest—divided Breyer from Scalia and the other conservatives. There were, to be sure, important exceptions: In NFIB v. Sebelius (2012), for example, Justice Breyer (and Elena Kagan) actually joined the conservatives in holding that Obamacare’s attempt to force states to expand Medicaid was unconstitutional. But in general, Breyer’s pragmatism seemed basically to be the familiar liberalism, perhaps with longer explanations.

And it therefore paled in comparison with the ascendant originalism, substantively and rhetorically. Harvard’s Laurence Tribe groused to President Obama, in a 2009 letter, that “it has been all too easy for Scalia to make his rigid and unrealistic formalism seem synonymous with the rule of law and to make Breyer’s pragmatism seem mushy and unconstrained by comparison.”

AFTER HIS FIRST decade on the Court, Breyer undertook to write a series of books describing and defending his jurisprudence more systematically. In Active Liberty: Interpreting our Democratic Constitution (2005), he urged that “the Constitution’s democratic objective” was not merely to constrain judges but to empower judges to help “make sense of our Constitution’s structure, illuminating aspects that otherwise might seem less coherent,” in order to “yield better law—law that helps a community of individuals democratically find practical solutions to important contemporary social problems.”

He further elaborated the theme in Making Our Democracy Work: A Judge’s View (2010), arguing that the Supreme Court “should reject approaches to interpreting the Constitution that consider the document’s scope and application as fixed at the moment of framing.” They should instead regard it “as containing unwavering values that must be applied flexibly to ever-changing circumstances,” so that the Constitution will “work well for Americans,” who in turn “must accept the Court’s decisions as legitimate.” And in The Court and the World: American Law and the New Global Realities (2015), he argued that American law can benefit when judges interpret at least some statutes and constitutional provisions with an eye to other nations’ own experiences.

Each of those books contested conservative originalism. But his latest book—published just before he announced his retirement—stands athwart a very different movement. In The Authority of the Court and the Peril of Politics (2021), Justice Breyer criticizes those who treat the Supreme Court as a merely political body. The Court’s ability to defend the Constitution’s
Breyer’s new book challenges those who are attempting to delegitimize the Roberts Court, and especially those who would attempt to pack it with additional seats.

rule of law, in cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, depends on the public’s willingness to accept its decisions as legitimate. But, he warns, that legitimacy is increasingly difficult to sustain in an era when public trust in institutions is at a low ebb, and when “reporters and commentators” reflexively characterize judges as partisan warriors.

For example: “The present Court is often described as having a conservative majority,” he writes, yet in evaluating it, Breyer urges that we consider not only *Bush v. Gore* and other Republican-friendly decisions but also the myriad recent cases where the Court refused to entertain Donald Trump’s post-election lawsuits, or where it ruled against “immigration, census, and other orders, rules, or regulations promulgated by” the Trump administration.

In short, Breyer’s new book challenges those who are attempting to delegitimize the Roberts Court, and especially those who would attempt to pack it with additional seats. Citing FDR’s infamous threat against the Court, and new court-packing threats in our own time, Breyer writes that “my goal is to ensure that those who debate these proposals also consider an important institutional point, namely how a proposed change could affect the rule of law itself.”

Invoking “the trust that the Court has gradually built, the long period of time needed to build that trust, and the importance of that trust in a diverse nation that values, indeed depends upon, a rule of law,” Breyer implores court-packers to “think long and hard before embodying those changes in law.” Court-packing is “a temptation better resisted.”

But how many progressives today would accept his premise? They no longer trust the courts, especially not the Supreme Court. Senator Elizabeth Warren wrote recently to dispute “the legitimacy of every action the current court takes.” To her, and to those of like mind, the conservative justices’ opinions—indeed, their very appointments to the Court after Merrick Garland’s failed nomination—render them illegitimate and unworthy of the public’s trust.

In *The Authority of the Court and the Peril of Politics*, Justice Breyer writes with a bluntness and urgency that matches or exceed anything else that he ever has written. A few months after its release, when he visited the White House to announce his retirement, his remarks echoed the book’s worries. “People have come to accept this Constitution,” he said, holding up a pocket version, “and they’ve come to accept the importance of the rule of law.” But as Lincoln and Washington knew, “it’s an experiment, it’s an experiment,” and its viability cannot be taken for granted. “I’m pretty sure it will,” he offered, before asking: “Does it surprise you that that’s the thought that comes into my mind today?”

Twenty-seven years ago, when Biden convened Breyer’s confirmation hearing, he remarked that the Court recently had “seemed poised to reconsider many basic questions that most of us and most of the legal community thought had already been well settled.”

Today he could introduce Justice Breyer’s successor with the very same words. Yet now there is much more at stake. Conservatives continue to urge the Court to reconsider the precedents on abortion, affirmative action, and other issues. But progressives are now reconsidering the Supreme Court itself, and the kind of justice that they would appoint to it.
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A NYONE WHO HAS studied the philosophy of science should find it strange to hear scientists and science-adjacent commentators express confident opinions about what the future holds. Science, as a method of understanding the natural world, is geared toward explaining phenomena already occurring and observable around us. It is clear to see that we do not float here on Earth; theories of gravity explain why. Airplanes, it is widely acknowledged, travel thousands of miles nonetheless; theories of aerodynamic lift explain why. Those explanations help us predict how the contained systems we have theorized will behave in the future, though small changes or unaccounted-for variables can disrupt what we thought was certain. And even when outcomes are more or less determinate, consensus is still hard to come by: As Scientific American reported in its 2020 article “No One Can Explain Why Planes Stay in the Air,” there remain “two competing theories that illuminate the forces and factors of lift. Both are incomplete explanations. Aerodynamicists have recently tried to close the gaps in understanding,” but “no consensus exists.”

Ponder that for a moment: A century after the first commercial flight, no one can fully explain how airplanes stay in the air. Yet the capital-S Science of global climate catastrophe, we are often told, is settled. Our future is bound to be calamitous, says the Science, drowned in rising sea levels if it isn’t scarred by increasing wildfires first. We can say so with 97 percent certainty, because that is the extent of the oft-cited consensus that gives Science its authority.

It does not take a scientist to recognize that these claims are unscientific. They may not be wrong,
but they are not true in the same way that scientific facts are. They are surely based on remarkably advanced models, projection, and technology, and interpreted by individuals trained in the natural sciences. But they are something epistemologically distinct from the knowledge we can derive through use of the scientific method. They are forecasts, projections, predictions. They take us from the realm of 50-50 to a world of probably A, probably not B. They are useful, but not dispositive.

Steven E. Koonin might not be so charitable. In Unsettled, the former Obama-administration under secretary for science argues that nearly everything now billed as “climate science” more closely resembles educated guesses—or worse, deliberate attempts to mislead. Koonin is an expert in quantitative and natural studies, trained as a computational physicist, nuclear astrophysicist, and environmental scientist, but his point is at its root philosophical: Climate is far too complex a system (really a set of systems) to warrant confident predictions.

That hasn’t stopped activists and media from going full Chicken Little. Most Americans are surely inured by now to the shrill chorus of journalists and enfants terribles warning that doom is imminent if we do not change our ways. We live in an era of human history, as Koonin shows throughout his book, trotting out measurements of the unmeasurable past leaves much to be desired—low confidence, in quant parlance—to say nothing of an infinitely complex future.

Take the classic climate catastrophe bugbear of rising sea levels. Our understanding of the ocean is staggering, considering just how vast oceans are (they contain 97 percent of all water on Earth) and how impenetrable their depths remain. Through “geological proxies” used by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, we can estimate global sea levels reaching back for 400,000 years. With the help of satellites and tide gauges placed around the world, we can track with fairly high certainty global mean sea level over the last century. We can therefore estimate the rate of rising sea levels accurately. But things get precarious when we try to figure out why, for instance, the rate of sea-level rise between 1925 and 1940 was about the same as the rise between 1994 and 2011, even if it’s often attributed to human influences. “It’s hard to know,” Koonin concludes, “what’s human-caused and what’s natural.” There are too many factors that we know influence climate-adjacent phenomena to say that any one is causing particular outcomes at a given time.

How about extreme weather events, including tornadoes and hurricanes? We frequently hear that these cataclysms will become more frequent and more intense because of anthropogenic climate change. And we understand extreme weather better than we ever have. We can estimate storm seasons’ overall strength by measuring accumulated cyclone energy and using a power-dissipation index. Scientists can even use sea surface temperatures in the Atlantic to construct an index of water-temperature changes dating back to the 19th century, showing that ocean temperatures rise and fall in multi-decade cycles.

But that is not to say that we understand extreme weather events well. Koonin points out that “as human influences have grown since the middle of the twentieth century, the number of significant tornadoes hasn’t changed much at all, but the strongest [tornado-spawning] storms have become less frequent.” Why that should be “remains a mystery.” We live in the most scientifically advanced era of human history, as Koonin shows throughout his book, trotting out measurements of the unmeasurable and deduction about the distant past, yet we can only enjoy “low confidence in projections of small-scale phenomena such as tornadoes.” Those aren’t Koonin’s words—they come from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s Special Report on Extreme Events.

At the heart of this uncertainty
is the underappreciated problem Koonin calls “Many Muddled Models.” Climate projections depend on computer models that contain myriad assumptions, simplifications, and omissions. These shortcomings are nothing to be ashamed of; they are what turn complete guesses into educated ones. They make projection feasible. But “a host of vexing practical problems,” Koonin warns, “means that climate model results require at least a pinch, if not a pound, of salt.”

To give just one example, clouds confound even the most advanced climate models, “since ordinary fluctuations in the height and coverage of clouds” affect “flows of sunlight and heat as much as do human influences.” So long as clouds remain difficult to model, predictions about heat in our environment will suffer from an inherent source of uncertainty. Koonin goes into great detail explaining similar sources of uncertainty in models and their interpretation, but that alone is not what makes Unsettled a must-read. The book is bound to be both controversial and enlightening because it provides, most of all, authority—Koonin developed CalTech’s computational physics curriculum—to back up the common-sense aphorism that “predictions are hard, especially about the future.”

To their credit, scientists observing climatological evidence and modeling future developments are generally humble about their findings. They pepper their papers with caveats and reminders of “low confidence” that laymen perusing a paper’s abstract may not see. Koonin does readers, especially those skeptical of his skepticism, a valuable service in Unsettled, doing what media and activists won’t: digging through actual published findings to uncover where authors frequently acknowledge the assumptions and uncertainties baked into their analyses.

Yet Koonin still finds some compromised scientists who obscure the uncertainty in their findings and parrot the “consensus” line. He tries to explain some factors leading them to confirmation bias: Scientists are susceptible to institutional pressures from government, universities, and NGOs to “adhere to” a particular message; despite their institutional commitment to objective truth, they are prone to succumb to peer pressure just like the rest of us. Orthodoxy is a powerful force within every field. One takeaway from Koonin’s indictment of his profession is that all of us, not just renegade scientists, have an obligation to fight forces of intellectual conformity wherever we encounter them. Enjoying a functioning society without some consensus on the facts is impossible, but every consensus is suspect when freethinkers are forced to conform. The fight against a censorious culture is not merely about cancelled individuals but about legitimizing the basic truths on which political choices are made.

But this only raises a bigger question, one that reappears each time Koonin stresses that many in the scientific community have become attached to anti-CO₂-emissions dogma: Why have scientific institutions—from funders to scientists to public voices of scientific findings—become so prone to obfuscation? Koonin distinguishes between using scientific inquiry to persuade and using it to inform, and he condemns those who are meant to do the latter but choose the former, substituting politics for dispassionate examination of objective phenomena. We know why an activist media is invested in “if it bleeds, it leads”—type reporting. But why are so many other participants in the knowledge-production industry so invested in convincing the public that a doomsday scenario is the most likely one? What’s the prime mover catalyzing the chain reaction of institutional corruption?

A few possibilities come to mind. For one, scientists educated at elite institutions are likely to internalize left-wing views on politics and economics, and they might therefore try to use their authority to present a state of affairs crying out for radical changes. Indeed, environmental hysteria has often been tied up in economic redistribution, government intervention, and Green New Deal-style upheaval. Relatedly, it is possible that residual hatred of George W. Bush and soreness over his defeat of environmentalist darling Al Gore in the 2000 presidential election plays a role. (Revisit Gore’s global-warming documentary/philippic An Inconvenient Truth and you will see how large President Bush looms in the movement’s collective imagination.)

Another explanation is that climate hysteria has become a religion of its own, helping supplant traditional faith by scratching secular man’s worshipful itch. It provides a sense of purpose, a tangible set of commandments—“Thou shalt not emit,” and “Honor thy Mother Gaia”—and an eschaton just beyond the horizon. And like all faith systems, evidence to the contrary must be incorporated as further proof of the religion’s truth or, as Koonin has experienced, derided as heresy and silenced. Scientists now persuade rather than inform because their religious obligations supersede any professional ones.

These have all been posited as explanations for the one-sidedness of climate discourse and...
the shocking treatment Koonin and his fellow dissidents receive from the media, the academy, and fellow scientists. They are all plausible. But Koonin’s marshaled evidence, covering what we know and what we still do not, points to another possibility. Perhaps fanaticism about the certainty of climate horrors stems from widespread unwillingness to accept that even in our most advanced phase of human existence, there is still so much we do not know.

There is something simultaneously shocking and frustrating about being able to reach back millennia into the past to know how high the tide crested when Rome ruled the Western world yet being unable to predict the weather a week in the future, much less the climate a decade hence. We know so much about the world that was, as Koonin’s work displays, yet so little about the world that will be. How humbling this must be to those who bill themselves as seers capable of using the tools of natural science to achieve the power of supernatural prophecy. One can see why our knowledge producers would use the mantle of Science to paper over distinctions between what is known and what remains indeterminate.

This is logically related to the modern secularist project to explain all things without reference to a higher power. As the centerpiece of the Enlightenment project to understand our world on its own terms, the notion that man is the measure of all things has been embraced wholesale by empiricists. What we can measure becomes most salient. That which we cannot measure, at least not with confidence, must take a back seat, so that we may rest comfortably in our assertion that there is nothing beyond human comprehension or, ultimately, control. If God taught childhood education: They found that, by age three, poorer children heard an astounding 30 million fewer words than well-off ones.

The “word gap” that Hart and Risley purported to expose in their monograph “Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children” tripped alarms among the progressive cognoscenti. Academics cited the paper’s findings more than 11,000 times. The Clinton Foundation launched a “Too Small to Fail” campaign dedicated to the proposition that “simple actions by parents and caregivers—describing objects seen during a bus ride, asking questions, singing songs,
reading aloud, telling stories—can significantly improve babies’ brain development and help build their vocabulary.” The Obama administration’s Office of Science and Technology Policy announced to great fanfare the rollout of a project aimed at “educating parents about the importance of talking to one’s baby.” Georgia state officials deployed the “Talk With Me Baby” project which encouraged new parents to supply “language nutrition” to their kids. And Bloomberg Philanthropies unveiled its Providence Talks program, which furnished “word pedometers” to help parents track their verbal output to their offspring.

These interventions predictably drew scorn from conservative observers, most of whom ridiculed the notion that federal, state, and nonprofit money was necessary to encourage parents to converse with their children. Others criticized the study itself, which derived from an analysis of only 42 families in the Midwestern United States and repeatedly proved unreplicable.

But in The Genetic Lottery: Why DNA Matters for Social Equality, an elegant, heterodox exploration of heredity and egalitarianism, Kathryn Paige Harden, a clinical psychology professor at the University of Texas, offers a much more fundamental—and persuasive—critique of the word-gap reaction and similarly muddled thinking and planning among those who misdiagnose the root causes of inequality and, accordingly, prescribe the wrong cure.

“The premise of the word-gap intervention is terribly shaky,” Harden contends. What if affluent children develop robust vocabularies not because their parents spoke to them frequently but because they inherited genes from those parents who, too, were predisposed to acquire fuller lexicons? “Before we spend literally millions of dollars on interventions designed to change a parental behavior in hopes of improving child outcomes,” Harden suggests, “it would be prudent to at least check to see that the correlation [persists] when we control for the fact that parents and children share genes.” More generally, Harden contends that “the widespread tendency to ignore the existence of genetic differences between people has hobbled scientific progress in psychology, education, and other branches of the social sciences.”

This criticism is commonplace among center-right scholars and policymakers who’ve long fallen on the nature side of the nature–nurture divide. But what’s surprising about Harden’s adoption of a genetics-first approach is her position on the ideological spectrum: She and a coterie of like-minded young social-science researchers are proud progressives. They seek to use the tools of genetics to further educational and economic egalitarianism. They’ve absorbed the slings and arrows of fellow travelers on the left who are adamantly opposed to hereditary explanations of individual differences. And while their proposed solutions occasionally fall short, their emergence augurs well for the future of human-development research and public-policy debate across the spectrum, especially as a torrent of new genetic data is expected to flood the field in coming years.

“I WILL ARGUE,” Harden proclaims at the outset of The Genetic Lottery, “that the science of human individual differences is entirely compatible with a full-throated egalitarianism.” She and her colleagues on the left have over the past few years unapologetically embraced the study of genetics not in spite of its implications for human equality (or inequality) but because. “Genetic differences between us matter for our lives,” Harden contends. “They cause differences in things we care about. Building a commitment to egalitarianism on our genetic uniformity is building a house on sand.”

Harden sets out to understand how genetics shape us physically and psychologically, to document how the academy and the marketplace reward certain genetically shaped traits, and to reimagine how we might transform them to include the winners and the losers of the genetic lottery. She adopts a flexible approach that places research on heredity in its appropriate context, using restaurants as a helpful metaphor. Many different factors influence an eatery’s success: cuisine, preparation, presentation, ambience, service. But it’s possible to draw lessons from a data-driven analysis of how restaurants in a given city flourish (e.g., by quantifying their Yelp reviews) on the basis of the ingredients they use in their food. Those ingredients, of course, do not drive the entirety of a bistro’s favorable notices, but they can certainly help explain its success and can provide valuable guidance to a restauranteur looking to open a new watering hole in the area.

So, too, do genes furnish crucial guidance in understanding how humans develop in many areas. With this in mind, Harden cites decades of research examining the differences in outcomes between identical and fraternal twins across seven different metrics: personality, cognitive abilities, education, employment, social hazards to health, mental disorders, and interpersonal relationships. That research concluded that all seven metrics “are substantially heritable, with about one-quarter to one-half of the variation due to differences in inherited DNA...
sequence.” Her extensive genome-wide association studies (GWAS) have confirmed that even non-cognitive skills, such as motivation, perseverance, personability, and self-restraint, are largely heritable and drive educational outcomes. For instance, those scoring high on a polygenic index of risky, impulsive behaviors were four times more likely to be convicted of a felony and three times more likely to be incarcerated.

Breaking ranks with other progressive social-sciences researchers, Harden also endorses the prominent use of IQ in assessing human development. IQ test results, she writes, “statistically predict things that we care about—including life itself” and therefore “cannot be wished away as unimportant.” She sharply criticizes social-justice guru Ibram X. Kendi’s insistence that “the use of standardized tests to measure aptitude and intelligence is one of the most effective racist policies ever devised.” (At times, however, she channels Kendi, as when she asserts that “creating a just social order requires anti-eugenics, not gene-blindness.”) Labeling willful genetic ignorance nothing short of “stealing,” Harden contends that “failing to take genetic information and with what they do, government agencies and state government can predict educational attainment within families.” Princeton sociologist Dalton Conley praised the approach that would develop systems inclusive of everyone “regardless of inclusive of everyone.”

For their scientific efforts, Harden’s lead. Stanford’s Sam Trejo and Ben Domingue praised the “great promise” of polygenic indices because they “may be used as control variables in studies of environmental effects.” One of their studies found “strong evidence that genotype can predict educational attainment within families.” Principally benefit some types of people (such as employers, landlords, and creditors) at the expense of others (such as employees, tenants, and borrowers).” To be sure, the policy solutions proposed by the hereditists of the left sometimes lack the rigor of their genetic analysis. For instance, Harden juxtaposes the “eugenic” approach of excluding genetically high-risk patients from insurance or health-care markets with the “genome-blind” policy that would prohibit insurers from using genetic information and with what she labels the “anti-eugenic” approach that would develop systems inclusive of everyone “regardless of
the outcome of the genetic lottery.” Yet in practice, her anti-eugenic methodology collapses into the genome-blind one, simply adding a traditional Great Society–style entitlement program into the mix. (Harden and colleagues also earn demerits for unfairly targeting my American Enterprise Institute colleague Charles Murray, who has repeatedly and unambiguously denounced eugenicist thinking.)

More generally, they don’t fully differentiate between the types of egalitarian interventions that would redress inequality rooted in genetics from those aimed to correct environmental inequities. True, the word gap, for instance, may derive more from hereditary forces than external ones, and, yes, compelling parents with more limited vocabularies to track their word counts seems unlikely to improve outcomes for their children. But the new geneticists of the left fail to outline what interventions would be effective in bolstering the vocabularies of genetically limited children.

These lacunae, however, are excusable. Harden and company are scientists, not lawmakers, and the political class bears primary responsibility for fashioning policies that suit the genetic realities they uncover. More important, while conservatives may not espouse the specific (and often flawed) policy solutions that Harden and company do suggest, there remains much to admire in the book’s approach. At a time when many on the left eschew objectivity in favor of moral clarity, exalt “Science” while disdaining scientific findings that don’t validate their priors, and censor opinions that don’t conform to their worldview, the hereditists of the left have courageously and unflinchingly stood their ground. By grasping the third rail of contemporary social-science research, Harden and her colleagues have shocked the academy out of its hermeneutic complacency. We need more, not less, truth at the foundation of our public discourse.

Perhaps more pressing still, over the next few years, a blizzard of genetic research is expected to bombard the social sciences, with carefully controlled longitudinal studies examining hereditary differences among a much wider range of ethnic groups than ever before. For instance, Belsky points to work in progress from groups such as the Social Science Genetic Association Consortium and Sociogenome and reports that “the United Kingdom has developed a national biobank that now includes genetic data and a wealth of other information from half a million people.”

Absent some moderating force, what Harden labels the “upcoming avalanche of genomic data from multi-ancestry populations” will bury those on the left determined to ignore genetic disparities while potentially snowballing into an unstoppable force represented by the neo-eugenicist right. A robust geneticist left, however, can temper the coming storm and help those in the middle—committed to the discovery of scientific truth, opposed to eugenics, and dedicated to shaping a fair and just society—weather its effects. Those of us on the center-right can disagree with the policy suggestions of Harden and company, but we should welcome them to the debate.

Propaganda Exposed

The Massacre That Never Was: The Myth of Deir Yassin and the Creation of the Palestinian Refugee Problem

By Eliezer Tauber

Koren Books, 336 pages

Reviewed by Seth Mandel

IN APRIL 1948, Deir Yassin was an Arab village of about a thousand residents. It was captured then by Jewish forces seeking to break the siege of Jerusalem during the war for Israel’s independence. Most of the fighting was done by the underground soldiers of the Irgun and Lehi, with assistance from the Haganah, the official fighting force of the Jewish establishment. A truck-mounted loudspeaker blaring a warning for residents to flee the village fell into a trench that had been dug by villagers. The result was a bloody house-to-house battle with a high death toll.

That much everyone agrees on. But how high was the death toll? How many of the Arabs killed were combatants? What were the circumstances under which they died? All that has been the subject of much dispute. Interestingly, the testimonies of the Jews and Arabs who were at Deir Yassin that day are consistent with each other. Meanwhile, a narrative was formed about Deir Yassin in the
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public imagination—one that portrays Jewish troops as rapists and child-murderers. That narrative was established by people far from the scene who were crafting post-battle propaganda. How to correct the record?

That was the task Eliyzer Tauber, an influential Middle East historian and former dean at Bar-Ilan University, set for himself. It was simple but ambitious: He would comb through the eyewitness testimony in Hebrew and Arabic to identify every single fatality and how each person died. “I do not think the investigator will be able to reach his research goals,” was how one reader for the Israel Science Foundation responded to Tauber’s book proposal. But Tauber succeeded. The book that resulted, The Massacre That Never Was, came out in Israel in 2018. It is indisputably the authoritative account of the battle that began the morning of April 9, 1948.

American readers have had to wait four years for a translation from the Hebrew. Why? Well, one university press in America told Tauber that “we could sell well to the right-wing community here but we would end up with a terrible reputation,” as Shmuel Rosner reported in 2018. Koren Publishers admirably stepped into the breach and, by publishing The Massacre That Never Was, has not only done the historical record a genuine service but has also exposed the cowardice and pusillanimity of the publishing houses that refused to touch Tauber’s groundbreaking work for fear of offending the leftists and Arabists who dominate Middle Eastern studies in American universities.

The background to the Deir Yassin tragedy is this: Palestine’s Arab population declared war on the nascent Jewish state as soon as the United Nations approved its plan to partition Mandatory Palestine into two countries, one Jewish and one Arab, in November 1947.

Jerusalem was surrounded by hostile Arab villages, and the British, who favored the Arabs, remained in control until the expiration of the Mandate (which would come in May 1948). Jerusalem was thus cut off from the other Jewish towns and put under siege. To prevent starvation and mass murder, Jewish forces had to pacify or conquer the villages surrounding the road to Jerusalem. Arab attacks on the road made it impossible to resupply the Jews of Jerusalem with food and arms.

Deir Yassin was one such place. Though it had economic ties with nearby Jewish villages, Arabs from Deir Yassin had joined the widespread anti-Jewish violence in 1929 and then again during the Arab Revolt of 1936–39. After the partition vote, relations between the Deir Yassin Arabs and the Jews began to erode for good.

Haganah intelligence overestimated the number of Arab fighters who would be present in Deir Yassin—and vastly underestimated the firepower awaiting Jewish forces. So while Jewish forces outnumbered their Arab counterparts, those forces did not have sufficient weaponry; they went into battle with mere pistols or malfunctioning machine guns. The villagers also built firing positions and, crucially, impassable trenches, one of which disabled the vehicle carrying the warning loudspeaker.

Further complicating matters was the fact that Irgun and Lehi commanders relied on runners instead of radios to communicate, and the siege of Jerusalem meant that the Jerusalem branches of the underground had become operationally independent from their central leadership. Irgun leader Menachem Begin, for example, didn’t even know which village was being targeted. His only demands of the forces theoretically under his command were that they warn the villagers first (hence the ill-fated loudspeaker) and that Irgun and Lehi follow international law.

Chaos reigned. The first Jewish forces to enter the village accidentally gave away their position when they mistook Arab guards for Jewish soldiers. The car with the loudspeaker got stuck. The guns of the Jewish forces proved largely useless against the stone structures of the village, which meant they had to blast their way into (and sometimes through) houses with explosives. They did so only after warning the inhabitants at each home; Arab survivors confirmed the individual warnings.

The Arab side added to the confusion. Women took part in combat, including as snipers. Some male fighters were disguised as women. Some male combatants attempted to mix in with convoys of female prisoners. And Arab snipers shot Arab prisoners who were helping transport the wounded.

Still, most of the villagers (around 700) were able to flee. In the end, 101 villagers were killed in the battle according to Tauber’s exhaustive process, which involved cross-listing genealogical records with fatality lists from researchers and village leaders over the course of decades. Tauber was able to ascertain the circumstances in which 84 were killed. Of those 84, “61 were killed under battle conditions.” The majority were men, though some of the women killed were combatants as well. There was no evidence of rape at all.

Arab survivor testimony confirms these findings. So what led British Chief Secretary of Palestine Henry Gurney to say the atrocities were so shocking that Bergen-Belsen “pales beside them”? What
made UN High Commissioner Alan Cunningham claim that “women and children were stripped, lined up, photographed and then slaughtered by automatic fire”?

There was fault on the Jewish side, to be sure: One Irgun officer (who was not at Deir Yassin) at first inflated the number of Arab casualties, thinking that would serve as a psychological victory over the Arabs. But such chest-puffery was brief and insignificant. The man most responsible for the lies of Deir Yassin was Husayn al-Khalidi, secretary of the Arab Higher Committee.

“We must make the most of this,” Khalidi told Arab journalist Hazzim Nusayba. “I think we should give this the utmost propaganda possible because the Arab countries apparently are not interested in assisting us.” According to Khalidi, the Arab authorities were therefore “forced to give a picture—not what is actually happening—but we had to exaggerate a little bit so that maybe the Arab countries would become enthusiastic to come and assist us.”

Khalidi instructed a group of survivors to participate in the ruse, telling them, “We want you to say that the Jews slaughtered people, committed atrocities, raped, and stole gold.”

The scheme panicked the Palestinian Arabs. “We cannot bear that our women should be raped,” local leaders responded. Remarkably, it was the people of Deir Yassin who tried to put the genie back in the bottle.

“There were no rapes. It’s all lies. There were no pregnant women who were slit open. It was propaganda...so Arab armies would invade,” one testified.

“Frankly speaking, I never heard from them anything about any incident of sexual assault,” said another.

When the battlefield was inspected, all the dead were found fully clothed with no signs of abuse or mutilation.

It wasn’t just sexual violence that the survivors of Deir Yassin pooh-poohed. “I believe that most of those who were killed were among the fighters and the women and children who helped the fighters,” one survivor said. Another recalled: “They did not kill women. They did not kill small children. Only men above the age of 15 or 16.” A third: “I did not see them actually slaughtering women or children in front of me.”

What happened after Deir Yassin was emblematic of the Arab–Israeli conflict on the whole. The Jews are falsely accused of atrocities their enemies actually carry out. Global powerbrokers amplify the lies. Jewish lives are taken.

“Perhaps no piece of anti-Zionist propaganda backfired on the Palestinians with greater force than the myth of Deir Yassin. They effectively depopulated themselves from the area. The other villages started to leave one after the other, without resistance, out of fear and apprehension of another similar massacre,” a survivor wrote a few years after the battle. According to a Palestinian researcher who interviewed survivors in the 1990s, “the Deir Yassin affair was the main cause for the 1948 exodus.” Palestinian officials blamed the Deir Yassin rumors for causing “the collapse of armed resistance,” as families throughout the country fled and soldiers ran back from the front to protect their families who were staying put. As many as 700,000 Palestinian Arabs went to Gaza or Jordan.

The lies also inspired reprisals. Jews defending Kfar Etzion surrendered to Arab invaders, who slaughtered over a hundred of them anyway, some chanting “Deir Yassin, Deir Yassin.” Similar chants could be heard from attackers who ambushed a convoy of Jewish medical staff en route to Hadassah hospital, killing nearly 80. Even the British tried to get in on the action: Cunningham, the high commissioner, ordered airstrikes on Deir Yassin to kill the remaining Jewish soldiers. Irgun and Lehi learned of the order and handed over control of Deir Yassin to the Haganah. Cunningham called off the strike.

What happened after Deir Yassin was emblematic of the Arab–Israeli conflict on the whole. The Jews are falsely accused of atrocities their enemies actually carry out—with intent. Global powerbrokers amplify the lies. Jewish lives are taken. Universities, publishing houses, and news media censor the facts so only the lie remains.

All of it hurts the Palestinian national cause in whose name the actions are supposedly taken. But that, of course, is a sacrifice Israel’s enemies are willing to make, as Tauber’s extraordinary book makes crystal clear.
joke, on the other hand, I fought for. And it was one of the very few instances in which the network censors changed their minds. The scene played exactly as we wrote it, with hilariously pixilated non-nudity intact. What won the network over was when I reminded them that this kind of joke wouldn’t cause their competitors in the cable and streaming services a moment’s hesitation.

I couldn’t say the same for the Civil War sequence, of course. Nudity and foul language are perfectly at home on cable channels and streaming services, but issues that touch—even glancingly—on race, ethnicity, and sexuality are not. In those arenas, the much-admired “bold” programming on cable channels and streaming services is just as tame as that of their broadcast cousins. Some combination of “wokeness” and “fear of angry wokeness” works to smother the really fun stuff, the stuff that comedy has been about since the first caveman showed his bare bottom around the campfire. Sexuality, race, ethnicity—you’re not even allowed to pixelate them, on broadcast, cable, or streaming.

And that makes comedy pretty hard to do.

You couldn’t do that today is a refrain that echoes throughout the entertainment business. We all know that the frank language of the comedies of the 1970s—All in the Family on television, Blazing Saddles in the movie theater, for instance—would be unthinkable today. The stand-up comedy of Richard Pryor and George Carlin would be stopped at the studio gates for racism, sexism, and a lot of isms and phobias yet to be defined. And the list of what’s unacceptable for comedy now gets refreshed with every passing month.

It wasn’t too long ago that a Saturday Night Live sketch made fun of the inability of Starbucks employees to get anyone’s name correctly spelled on their coffee order. The sketch is hilarious, but it includes some very, um, ethnic dialect in its voice-over dialogue. It is unquestionably, by the “woke” standards of 2022, deeply racist. (And it was kinda-sorta over the line when it was aired a few years ago.)

The comedy that now prevails on television—all forms of it: cable, broadcast, and streaming—is either the safest kind of quirky and diverse, like Emily in Paris or The Good Place, or it’s a foul-mouthed cynical ensemble, like Succession or Veep. These are funny shows, of course, but you never watch them, or anything on TV these days, and think, Wow! I can’t believe they got away with that!

Comedy, though, is at its best when it’s getting away with something. Comedy is a hard thing to contain. Eventually, some of the really good stuff leaks out.

Right now, one place to see I can’t believe they did that comedy is on the mostly unregulated free-for-all called TikTok. It’s there that (mostly) young people are telling funny stories, making hilariously unacceptable jokes about race and sexuality, and doing the kind of material you won’t see on the television channels you pay for.

There are black performers doing comedy routines and impersonations without a thought to the prevailing rules about acceptable, liberal racial discourse. There are young gay comedians doing the kind of frank and mortifying material that could come only from the generation that came after Will & Grace and Obergefell. There’s a young Chinese comic doing a ferocious impression of two Chinese dads, each competing to see whose son is more accomplished. There is even a young man with cerebral palsy who delivers some of the funniest material on any screen, fit for a new generation of Mel Brooks–style movies.

And all of it comes unfiltered and unpixelated to your “For You Page” on the TikTok app.

The one thing that connects all these performers is their youth. Perhaps—and I’m being optimistic here—we’re seeing the green shoots of a Post Woke generation. Comedy, some young comedians have discovered, is supposed to be a little bit messy. Not yet part of the official entertainment industry economy, these performers have created a black market of comedy. There is a place where comedy lives and thrives. You just have to know where to look.
I WAS WORKING on a television episode recently that included two sequences that caused us big trouble.

The first sequence involved a character in a hospital gown—the kind that drapes across the front and is loosely tied across the back—in which the character's rear end hung out indecorously.

We're not fools, of course. We were aware that the executives at the broadcast network on which our show aired would have concerns. So when we shot the sequence, we made sure the actor's bottom was covered by a flesh-colored pair of tight underpants.

And then, in a belt-and-suspenders move, when we edited the shot, we pixilated the entire area. This process distorted the video enough so that instead of being confronted by an actual human tuchus, the viewer was treated to a chessboard-looking matrix of mixed-up squares.

The network wasn't having it. Under no circumstances, we were told, could we depict "rear nudity" on television.

But we weren't depicting nudity, we said. The actor isn't naked. He's wearing tiny little underpants.

But he looks naked, they replied. It didn't matter whether the actor was wearing tiny underpants or no underpants at all. What mattered was that viewers might think he was nude onstage—with children present in the scene—and that might open an entire noisy controversy that might escalate into something serious that might be a whole big thing, so why not just cut the bit entirely?

The rule is, in other words, you cannot pixelate even non-nudity because someone might think there's actual nudity underneath.

That wasn't the only problem we encountered with the episode. One sequence involved a character who was spending time at a Civil War reenactment. He was especially excited because he had finally been promoted, after years of portraying a corpse, to the position of General Stonewall Jackson, one of the titans of the Confederate army.

The executives were deeply unsettled. Is there any way, they asked, that we could sort of downplay that whole angle? Maybe just lift the parts that seemed too Stonewall Jackson-y?

"But the character isn't actually on the side of the Confederate army," I said. "You guys get that, right? He's pretending to be a Confederate because for a Civil War reenactment to make any sense at all, you need someone to play the Confederates."

Yes, they said, we get it. But what mattered was that some viewers might see the uniforms and the regalia and misunderstand the whole thing. And that might open an entire noisy controversy that might escalate into something serious that might be a whole big thing, so why not cut the bit entirely?

The rule is, in other words, you cannot pixelate even non-racism because someone might think there's actual racism underneath.

I have been a comedy writer and producer for more than 30 years, and my usual response to idiotic network diktats like these is to cave instantly and find another joke.

So I dragged the actors back into a recording studio and made them re-record some crucial dialogue, turning "General Stonewall Jackson" into the unspecific "the General" and "It's been my dream," into something more like, "Someone has to do it."

The bare-backside

Rob Long has been the executive producer of six TV series.

Rob Long

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The Israel Genocide Slander

Of all the lies told by Israel’s enemies, the accusation of genocide is the greatest falsehood—refuted by the word’s meaning and all facts. Why do they repeat it?

Despite a complete absence of aggression targeting any people based on religion or ethnicity, despite unmatched efforts to spare the lives of enemies bent on Israel’s destruction—and make peace with them—the world’s only Jewish state still draws the unjust accusation of genocide.

What are the facts?

In May 2021, as Israel defended itself against 4,500 Hamas missile attacks from Gaza, actor Mark Ruffalo accused Israel of genocide. Later, Ruffalo retracted, saying the accusation is “not accurate, it’s . . . being used to justify antisemitism.” Later that year, a college student told Vice President Kamala Harris that Israel is involved in “ethnic genocide.” Harris responded that “your voice, your truth, should not be suppressed.” Unlike the Vice President, Ruffalo was correct: The statement is anti-Semitic, because it’s slanderous—a lie.

What is genocide? “Genocide” defines “acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” The Jews of Europe are the best-known victims of genocide. Hitler’s Germany tried to eliminate the Jewish people—killed six million for their “crime” of being Jewish. Likewise, the Armenian genocide: In World War I, Ottoman Turks targeted Armenians in order to reduce their population to prevent an Armenian state. Some 600,000 to 1.5 million Armenians were killed. More recently, East Timor, with a population of 650,000, was invaded by Indonesia in 1975. In the next 25 years approximately 18,600 people were killed and another 84,200 deaths were caused by Indonesia’s starvation campaign to exterminate the East Timorese.

While many other modern incidents have been termed genocide, they all have in common the intentional murder or physical displacement of a national, ethnic or religious group. The Jews of Europe are the best-known victims of genocide. Hitler’s Germany tried to eliminate the Jewish people—killed six million for their “crime” of being Jewish. Likewise, the Armenian genocide: In World War I, Ottoman Turks targeted Armenians in order to reduce their population to prevent an Armenian state. Some 600,000 to 1.5 million Armenians were killed. More recently, East Timor, with a population of 650,000, was invaded by Indonesia in 1975. In the next 25 years approximately 18,600 people were killed and another 84,200 deaths were caused by Indonesia’s starvation campaign to exterminate the East Timorese.

Facts completely refute the anti-Semitic lie.

Are Palestinians victims of genocide? Since Israel’s founding, an estimated 20,000 Palestinians have been killed in military conflicts—the majority in wars or terror attacks initiated by Palestinians against Israel. Of these, an estimated 4,000-5,000 Palestinians died as non-combatants involuntarily exposed to battle, usually as human shields. Clearly, combatants killed in their own aggressive attacks are not examples of genocide—nor are unintentional civilian casualties of such battles.

Has Israel tried to eliminate the Palestinian people? There’s zero evidence that Israel has intentionally targeted innocent Palestinians. Indeed, Israel’s attacks on its enemies are uniformly defensive responses to unprovoked aggression. In addition, Israel famously avoids harming civilians during its battles with Hamas and other terrorists—even issuing advance warnings of retaliation. Israel also annually donates thousands of tons of medicines, food and other essentials to sustain Palestinians in Gaza—despite regular attacks on Israel by Hamas. Thousands of Palestinians also travel to Israel every year to receive free medical care.

Have Palestinians been illegally removed from their land? While Israeli courts do evict Palestinian “squatters” from lands owned by Jews and from Israeli public lands, this is simply rule of law. Palestinians also claim to “own” vast territories on which they have never had sovereignty and to which they have no legal claim.

In addition, about 750,000 Arabs left Israel during Israel’s 1948 War of Independence—when Arab armies invaded. At least half fled of their own free will. Others were removed by Israel for their safety or they were suspected enemies. (Some 156,000 Arabs chose to remain in Israel during this war and have thrived.) Such dislocations take place in all major military conflicts—millions of Europeans in World War II and between 10-20 million people when India and Pakistan became independent in 1947. Dislocation as a result of war—rather than as its goal—is not genocide.

Palestinian-Arabs have multiplied with no interference from Israel: Palestinian population at Israel’s birth in 1948 was about 1.3 million—today it’s about 6.8 million, of which some two million are Israeli Arab citizens. Such robust population growth alone refutes accusations of genocide.

Why do Israel’s enemies repeat the anti-Zionist slander? Those who oppose Israel’s existence cannot use honest facts to convince people of good will that Israel is evil. In fact, Israel wants peace and has offered it many times to Palestinians over 74 years. Yet, the Palestinians have greeted these offers with thousands of terrorist attacks, killing some 3,500 Israeli civilians.

Time to refute the Israel genocide lie. False accusations of genocide are attempts to delegitimize the Jewish state, demonize Jews and destroy Israel. These tactics perfectly fit the globally accepted definition of anti-Semitism. Those who attack Israel with this falsehood fully deserve the label of anti-Semite.

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