THE WAR ON WORK
BY BARTON SWAIM

The American Jewish Studies Disaster
BY JOSHUA KARLIP
When our ambulances can’t get there first to begin lifesaving treatment, our Medicycles can.

No EMS organization in Israel arrives faster to a medical emergency than Magen David Adom. But when traffic prevents an MDA ambulance from being first at the scene, it’s usually an MDA Medicycle that is. That’s why, between our ambulances and Medicycles, MDA is first to arrive to medical emergencies 91% of the time.

Make an impact by saving a life in Israel. Support Magen David Adom today at afmda.org/give.
In the 1990’s, Michael Steinhardt left a stellar career on Wall Street and spent the next three decades launching revolutionary philanthropic programs like Birthright Israel that offer a proud, rich future for the next generation of secular American Jews.

Known for his outspoken views, Mr. Steinhardt has now penned *Jewish Pride*. In it, he identifies the elements of a vibrant, strong and sustainable Jewish future.

By turns provocative, inspiring, revealing, and outright hilarious, *Jewish Pride* captures its author’s unique personality and outlook and offers honest talk about the Jewish world today, including a proposal to completely change the relationship between Israel and American Jewry.

*Jewish Pride* is “astute, candid, and could only have been written by someone whose access and contributions have made a difference in the lives of countless Jews.”

—Rabbi David Wolpe

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“What propelled me then — as now — was my deep pride in being Jewish, my belief in Jewish Peoplehood and my commitment to Jewish joy and excellence.”

—Michael Steinhardt
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Parents vs. Schools

To the Editor:
ROBERT PONDISCIO offers a good analysis of the problem facing American parents of school-age children (“Schoolchildren Are Not ‘Mere Creatures of the State.’” September). I have in fact started my own resistance group. What we all need is a better scope of the legal resources that can be used against schools in this matter. Nothing will change until the offending teachers, principals, and administrators are dragged to court and removed from education permanently. Additionally, legal action needs to be taken against teachers’ colleges and the “consultants” who provide educators with these insidious ideas about gender.

Bozidar Jovanovic
Rye, New York

Robert Pondiscio writes:

THANK YOU to both Bozidar Jovanovic and Peter A. Barnard for the kind words. Both will likely nod knowingly at an interesting coda to the piece: In Virginia last month, the state’s department of education told schools they must “keep parents fully informed” on all issues related to their children’s health and psychological development, and that they must not “encourage or instruct teachers to conceal material information about a student from the student’s parent, including information related to gender.” Yet this official guidance—sensible and legally sound—was roundly criticized by educators and the media. The New York Times, for example, characterized it as “reversing school protections for transgender students” but elided the obvious question: Protection from whom?

Peter A. Barnard
London, England

To the Editor:
AS EVER, Robert Pondiscio puts his finger on the pulse of the culture in his much-needed article on the practices of American schools. In a systems point of view, schools are victims of organizational practices that have their roots in the separation of staff, students, and parents. Even in the United Kingdom, I find the idea of collaboration between participant actors much lauded but empty of substance. Add hysteria to the mix and things go wrong fast in the absence of leadership.

Peter A. Barnard
London, England
To the Editor:

I AM A RETIRED Reactor Inspector and Senior Public Affairs Officer with the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission. I don't pretend to speak for the NRC, of course, but I can affirm that what James B. Meigs wrote about nuclear waste in the September issue is accurate (“What a Waste”). As a PAO, I had to deal regularly with the anti-nuclear movement. Yes, it’s a religion, not a rational, scientific enterprise. Yes, America’s nuclear-waste problem is a myth. It’s the result of a conscious effort to kill nuclear power through “constipation,” as the anti-nuclear movement conceives it.

An aspect of the problem that Meigs might have mentioned was Harry Reid’s role in preventing a solution to the nuclear-waste issue. Reid was offended when other states that were being considered for waste repositories voted, in Reid’s eyes, to “shove nuclear waste down Nevada’s throat.” In 2005, Senator Reid managed to have President Bush appoint one of his aides, Gregory Jaczko, to become an NRC commissioner. In 2009, President Obama elevated Jaczko to chairman, likely on Reid’s advice. Jaczko, probably the only anti-nuclear activist ever to serve on the NRC, was a disaster. Within a couple of days of taking over as chairman, he ordered a complete halt to the NRC’s work reviewing the DOE’s Yucca Mountain proposal. This, of course, was highly illegal because, as Meigs points out, the DOE is required by law to accept nuclear waste.
Letters: November 2022

An Ordinate
Fear of Communism

James B. Meigs writes:

I thank Breck W. Henderson for providing this informative background. President Obama’s decision to elevate an avowedly anti-nuclear activist to the chairmanship of the NRC did enormous damage to the nuclear-power industry in the U.S. Not only did Jaczko work to scuttle the Yucca Mountain project, but he also opposed the construction of new nuclear plants in general. Jaczko’s obstructionism wasn’t the only reason U.S. power companies stopped building nuclear-power facilities, but it certainly didn’t help.

As Mr. Henderson also points out, the notion that exposure to miniscule levels of radiation poses life-threatening health risks has been scientifically debunked. (The United Nation’s nuclear-health agency, for one, rejects the theory.) Nonetheless, the LNT model remains the basis for too much U.S. nuclear policy. By clinging to this outdated model, regulators impose costs on the nuclear industry and the public, while achieving no improvement in public health. This situation is all too typical of how nuclear power is regulated in this country.

Breck W. Henderson
Arlington, Texas

An Ordinate
Fear of Communism

To the Editor:

A S Gary Dreyer indicates, most young Americans have no true sense of the dangers of Communism or the effects that the USSR had on the world stage (“Why and How to Revive American Anti-Communism,” September).

Boomers went through duck-and-cover exercises in grammar school. They were aware of bomb shelters, Sputnik, the arms race, Checkpoint Charlie, and the isolation of Eastern Europe.

Do schools even teach about the lies and hypocrisy of genuinely oppressive political systems anymore? Looking at the current state of the university and our political culture, one must conclude that the answer is no.

As for me, I married into an amazing family that knew the oppression of Communism firsthand. My in-laws fled Lithuania during World War II, embraced Western values, and thrived here in a free society. My mother-in-law visited her surviving family in Lithuania a number of times, but my father-in-law refused to revisit his homeland, so strong was his fear of any lingering Communist sympathizers in Vilnius.

Bob Skilnik
Chicago, Illinois

Letters: November 2022
Gary Dreyer writes: I VERY MUCH appreciate Bob Skilnik’s letter. If he has not had the chance to visit Vilnius or the Baltic states more broadly yet, I strongly encourage him to do so. These countries have done a remarkable job of commemorating the Soviet and Nazi occupations of 1940–91 and are today stalwart defenders of Western values. Lithuania in particular has been the subject of Beijing’s ire because of its vocal support for Taiwan. Perhaps someday soon, philanthropists will start organizing trips to the Baltics and the former Eastern Bloc states to educate American youth about the crimes of totalitarian regimes, as these subjects continue to be largely excluded from curriculums.

To the Editor: READING Rick Marin’s article on The Godfather reminded me of an experience I had a long time ago that has always colored my thoughts on the film (“The Godfather at 50,” September). In 1971, I worked in Brooklyn in the Neighborhood Action Program, which was part of the mayor’s office. While there, I had an intern who had run afoul of the Mafia by loan-sharking. He was called for a “sitdown” and asked me to drive him to an Italian restaurant in South Brooklyn. He went to his meeting, returned in half an hour, and said he was fine. But he also told me that in the car behind us was “button man” who was to kill me if he didn’t come out of the restaurant.

The Godfather was terrific, but it created a genre in which Mafiosi were heroes to be respected and honored. The genre completely replaced the Western and engendered the pathological interest that many Americans now unfortunately have in organized crime. Paul Weinberg Clarksburg, New Jersey

To the Editor: RICK MARIN’S article on The Godfather was terrific. At various salons and kibbitzing sessions, whenever I’m asked to name my favorite movie, I never hesitate to say The Godfather. Marin’s dissection of the film explains why I and so many others feel the way we do about it. Immense talent, craftsmanship, sweeping drama, a sense of history, and detail-oriented perfectionism— it’s all there on the screen.

The movie came out while I was on leave from the Army, and I was still in uniform when I raced to see it. I recall walking out of the theater mesmerized at how humans can accomplish such great feats.

Robert Kotler, M.D.
Beverly Hills, California

Viewers Pounce

To the Editor: CHRISTINE ROSEN HAS, as usual, nailed the essence of the media’s bias problem (“Republicans Pounce on the Liberal Media,” September). And the problem has been getting progressively worse each year. I no longer consume any mainstream media. Is that what these broadcasters want? Do they not see what is happening?

Many seem unable to hold two truths in their mind at once: one, that the media is intolerably biased to the left, and two, that much of the right supports a man so clearly lacking in ethics and morality that a modicum of objectivity would cause one to shade his eyes from the obviousness of the spectacle. Neither truth justifies the existence of the other, nor does either one negate our responsibility to condemn what is clearly wrong, no matter where we see it. These are very disturbing times for those of us brought up to think critically, be objective, and adhere to a personal level of integrity for no other reason than because it is the right thing to do.

Lawrence J. Feldman Lake Oswego, Oregon
ON SEPTEMBER 28, President Biden hosted a conference at the White House on hunger, nutrition, and health. Biden greeted the attendees. He took a moment to thank the bipartisan group of lawmakers who had helped organize the event. Running through the list, Biden asked, “Jackie, are you here? Where’s Jackie? I didn’t think she was—she wasn’t going to be here—to help make this a reality.”

The president was searching for Representative Jackie Walorski, an Indiana Republican first elected to Congress in 2012. There was no way he could have found her in the crowd, however, since Walorski had perished in a car crash some two months earlier. Biden knew about the accident. The terrible story had been national news. At the time, he and the first lady had expressed their “shock and sadness” at the congresswoman’s death. Biden had ordered U.S. flags to be flown at half-staff for a day.

Clearly the president had forgotten that Walorski was dead. The moment embarrassed Biden, and his staff made the situation worse. At a briefing later that afternoon, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre insisted that nothing was amiss: Biden mentioned the late Representative Walorski simply because she was top of mind for the president.”Jean-Pierre said. “Top of mind” became Jean-Pierre’s mantra as she fended off questions from an unusually feisty White House press corps.

The implication was that Biden simply had made a passing reference to the recently deceased as though she were alive—something many people do after a loved one’s death. What Jean-Pierre couldn’t explain, however, was why Biden acted as if he expected Walorski to be in the room, and why her absence confused him. As James Rosen, a reporter in the briefing room, put it: “Karine, I have John Lennon top of mind just about every day, but I’m not looking around for him anywhere.”

Biden was in luck. None of the three network news broadcasts covered his mental slip. The press soon moved on to cover Vladimir Putin’s nuclear saber-rattling. And Vice President Harris diverted attention from her boss with a misstep of her own. “The United States,” she said the next day while visiting the DMZ, “shares a very important relationship, which is an alliance with the Republic of North Korea.” Biden always can count on his vice president to make him look acceptable, if not good, by comparison.

The White House staff must have breathed a collective sigh of relief. They had survived another controversy over the president’s age and fitness for office. It won’t be the last time Biden and his aides face such questions, however. To the contrary: Biden’s age and mental acuity become more of a political problem with each passing day. Concerns over his cognitive abilities and physical health may hover in the background for now. They will soon move to the fore.

Biden will turn 80 years old on November 20.

Matthew Continetti is a senior fellow and the Patrick and Charlene Neal Chair in American Prosperity at the American Enterprise Institute.
is the oldest president in American history. The second- and third-oldest, Donald Trump and Ronald Reagan, became president at ages 70 and 69, respectively. The similarities end there. Trump, to put it gently, does not act his age. And Reagan disarmed his critics with a combination of personal charm and self-deprecating humor. Biden, by contrast, is prickly and defensive.

In his occasional pratfalls and hectoring rhetoric, Biden more closely resembles Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. He shuffles his feet. On several occasions he has tripped on the stairs to Air Force One. In June he fell from his bicycle. From time to time, at the end of a photo op or press availability, he looks lost.

Some of Biden’s miscues are harmless. The world is not going to end because the president wondered where Representative Walorski was, or honored “President Harris,” or mistook Senator Mark Warner (D., Va.) for the late Senator John Warner. Other verbal eruptions are more consequential. There are consequences when Biden says four times that U.S. troops will defend Taiwan if China invades, or declares that, “by God,” Putin “cannot remain in power,” or announces that the coronavirus pandemic is “over.” Biden’s sentiments may be correct, but they run afoul of his administration’s talking points. The mismatch discomfits audiences, both foreign and domestic. It contributes to the speculation that the president is not fully in command.

Biden’s advanced age influences his schedule. He holds few press conferences and seldom gives one-on-one interviews. He travels to his homes in Delaware or to Camp David most weekends, spending more time away from the White House than his predecessors. In a New York Times piece over the summer, Peter Baker observed that Biden “stays out of public view at night.” In recent weeks he has been more active, fundraising for the midterm election. “His energy level, while impressive for a man of his age, is not what it was, and some aides quietly watch out for him,” Baker wrote.

Biden’s condition has the makings of an insoluble dilemma. Unless he discovers the fountain of youth, voter worries about his future and national anxiety over his capacities can only grow. According to the Harvard-Harris poll, Biden commanded only 30 percent support from Democrats in a hypothetical 2024 primary vote. Seventy-one percent of registered voters said Biden should not run again. When asked why, 45 percent said the reason was “he’s a bad president.” Another 30 percent said, “he’s too old.” Sixty percent said that Donald Trump also shouldn’t run.

Biden is unpopular. Worse, his own party views him as an albatross. In a July NYT/Siena poll, 64 percent of Democrats said they want another nominee in 2024. That same month, a CNN poll found that 75 percent of Democrats and Democratic-leaning voters want another standard-bearer. A late September Washington Post/ABC News poll showed that 56 percent of Democrats or Democratic leaners preferred someone other than Biden as the party’s 2024 nominee.

The Democratic desire for new leadership must be related to the fact that Biden would begin a hypothetical second term at age 82 and end it at age 86. No one likes to talk about it, but voters have deep reservations about the rising age of our political class.

A CBS News poll released in early September found that 73 percent of Americans supported maximum age limits for elected officials. Seventy-one percent of Democrats agreed. A 40-percent plurality of adults said that the limit should be set at 70 years old. Under that standard, Biden would have been ineligible to run for president in 2020.

Public fear that an octogenarian Biden will be unable to respond in a major crisis—and there are so many crises to choose from—will be a factor if the president decides to run for reelection. In mid-September, when Scott Pelley of 60 Minutes asked whether he is “committed to running again,” Biden answered, “It’s much too early to make that kind of decision. I’m a great respecter of fate.” A moment later, Biden added, “Look, my intention as I said to begin with is that I would run again. But it’s just an intention.” That’s what we in the business call “wiggle room.”

Pelley also asked Biden about his mental state. “Some people ask whether you are fit for the job,” Pelley said. “And when you hear that, I wonder what you think.” “Watch me,” Biden replied. “We are watching, though. We just don’t like what we see.”
WHAT HAPPENS when a newspaper becomes the story?

If you live in Los Angeles and have been following the saga of the city's only local daily, the Los Angeles Times, it likely further erodes what little trust you might still have in the fourth estate's ability to provide objective coverage of events.

The drama began last spring, when Los Angeles magazine asked whether Nika, the daughter of billionaire Times owner Patrick Soon-Shiong, was “the Ivanka of the Los Angeles Times.” This is unfair to Ivanka, who presumably believes in the free market and the wealth it has generated for those lucky enough to be born into it. Nika Soon-Shiong, by contrast, believes that the state should redistribute wealth via “equity-based UBI”—that is, giving a guaranteed universal basic income to racial minorities.

Influence Watch describes Fund for Guaranteed Income, the group of which Nika Soon-Shiong is executive director, as an organization that “uses identity politics as basis for determining which communities should receive the payments.” She is also the executive director of the Compton Pledge, which lobbies municipal governments to guarantee income and “establish waivers so welfare recipients can receive both universal basic income and welfare” as “a form of establishing equity and reparations for ethnic minorities.”

The Stanford-educated Nika is no fan of law enforcement, either—something the Times had to learn when the meddling Millennial heiress made her feelings about cops public. As Los Angeles magazine reported, in the wake of nationwide riots and unrest in 2020, Nika “called out Times editors in a tweet objecting to the use of the word ‘looting’ in a pair of headlines. ‘Absolutely the wrong messaging @latimes,’” she tweeted, even though the stories were about people who were, in fact, rioting and looting; the situation deteriorated to the point that the city's mayor requested that the governor send in the National Guard.

Such public complaints might have remained an annoying bit of entitled whining by a newspaper owner's child, had that been the extent of Nika's involvement. But around the same time, Nika also started sitting in on staff meetings. Not coincidentally, the newspaper's Standards and Practices Committee “made a language update to its style guide around using the words 'looting' and 'looters.'” This was followed by an announcement by the newsroom committee that “it was putting limits on the use of the word 'looting' over concerns regarding the racial connotation of the word.”

As an appointed member of the West Hollywood Public Safety Commission, Nika also led a push to defund the Sheriff's Department. She succeeded, replacing law-enforcement officers with “unarmed security ambassadors” at precisely the moment when violent crime was rising precipitously in the city.

She is now accused of having exerted her influence to get the Times to endorse a self-described radical progressive candidate for city controller, Kenneth Mejia, who happens to be her personal friend and (surprise!) also a vocal supporter of universal basic in-

CHRISTINE ROSEN is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.
come and defunding the police (“defund the police till the last penny”). Mejia, a political neophyte, was until recently a Green Party activist whose now-deleted Twitter history includes frequent use of the hashtag #joe-bidenisaracist and denunciations of “corporate loving rapists like Trump and Biden.” In 2019, he tweeted, “If WE were in Congress we’d #StandWithIlhan [meaning Representative Ilhan Omar].” He added that he would also “criticize oppressive governments” such as “Israel.”

As for Nika, it would be difficult to design a more perfect avatar of progressive hypocrisy—a billionaire’s kid using her father’s newspaper to promote policies that make the poor more vulnerable to crime and economic hardship while simultaneously propping up unqualified elite friends for public jobs. Yet although Nika acknowledged to Politiico that she does “advocate” her causes at the Times, uses a Times email, and lists herself as a “special adviser” to the paper, she clearly sees no issue with using her position as the owner’s daughter to influence the paper’s coverage. Billionaire silence is also violence, evidently.

This is the logical evolution of the patron model of newspaper journalism that has emerged in recent years, as with Amazon founder Jeff Bezos’s purchase of the Washington Post, which was likely done with an eye toward protecting his company’s interests in Washington, D.C. Yet unlike at the Los Angeles Times, most observers agree that Bezos has remained largely hands-off regarding editorial direction at the paper. The Soon-Shiong family pursues a different course: As Los Angeles magazine reported, the Times’ executive editor, Kevin Merida, lives in the tony neighborhood of Brentwood in a house owned by Soon-Shiong père—a kind of grace-and-favor arrangement that has raised questions about Merida’s objectivity.

The lefty billionaire’s daughter adds a new angle to the ongoing story of journalism’s changing fortunes as well. For the past few years, journalists have been railing against the supposedly evil hedge funds and private equity groups that have been buying up daily newspaper owners such as Tribune and McClatchy. (“Liberals Are Losing the Journalism Wars,” read an alarmist New Republic headline from 2020 that decried “pay-for-play propaganda” on conservative websites). But the story of how Big Bad Hedge Funds Destroyed Local News and Ushered in Fascism (like the story of how right-wing, but not left-wing, billionaires are the real threat to democracy) was always plagued by contradictions.

During the last election, for example, a liberal dark-money group called ACRONYM pushed progressive propaganda through its Courier Newsrooms in battleground states such as Arizona, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Michigan. The CEO of ACRONYM at the time, Tara McGowan (who has the Obama slogan “Yes we can” tattooed on her forearm), wrote in a June 2019 memo about the company’s plans to create seemingly local news sites (such as one called the Gander in Michigan) to push Democratic messaging. “Content designed to drive strategic narratives to key audiences will be delivered on a drip over time,” particularly “before, during, and between election cycles.” The goal, she wrote, was to “build nimble communications infrastructure for Dems in critical states.”

As Bloomberg reported, “while the articles she publishes are based on facts, nothing alerts readers that Courier publications aren’t actually traditional hometown newspapers but political instruments designed to get them to vote for Democrats.” The deception is the point: “To McGowan, emulating the homespun, hyperlocal style of the fast-vanishing small-town newspaper is important for building familiarity and trust.”

What does this suggest for the future? Left-leaning media will likely continue to support their own subculture of quasi-propaganda if it wins them elections in key states (just as they hypocritically spend money promoting MAGA Republican candidates in primaries to make general elections more winnable for Democrats while criticizing Republicans for threatening democracy).

But they are also getting bolder about promoting their radical ideas to a still-ambivalent public. When journalist, novelist, and avowed socialist Upton Sinclair ran for governor of California in 1934, he launched his own newspaper, the EPIC News, to promote his candidacy and socialist platform. The paper produced nonstop promotional literature for his various schemes (the Saturday Evening Post described Sinclair’s EPIC plan, which stood for “End Poverty in California,” as “Utopia Unlimited”). Sinclair lost to a Republican. Reflecting on that loss decades later in a letter to fellow socialist Norman Thomas, he wrote, “The American people will take Socialism, but they won’t take the label.” As the recent controversies at the Los Angeles Times demonstrate, some wealthy progressive members of the journalist elite are betting that’s no longer the case.
I N 1974, a 73-year-old woman was found murdered in Torrance, California. Police quickly decided that Walter Marx, a tenant in her boarding house, was the likely suspect. There wasn’t much evidence, but the coroner had noticed an “elliptical laceration” on her nose that might have been a bite mark inflicted during a struggle. The prosecutor brought in three dentists to see if they could match the injury specifically to the suspect’s teeth. They took a mold of Marx’s mouth. Meanwhile, the victim—who had been buried six weeks earlier—was exhumed. Then the dentists went to work trying to prove a match.

Dentists had been involved in forensic work for years; they were often called in to help identify human remains using dental records. Some of these dentists were eager to get into the more glamorous (and lucrative) work of identifying perpetrators and testifying at trials. There was just one hitch: The claim that human teeth would leave a unique impression in human flesh—and that such an impression could be reliably tied to a single person—had never been demonstrated in any sort of laboratory study. In fact, there was no scientific basis for it at all. According to the Supreme Court’s “Frye test,” scientific evidence should be allowed at trial only if it is generally accepted by the “relevant scientific community.” In the Marx case, though, even the judges noted that there was “no established science of identifying persons from bite marks.” Nonetheless, the notion looked like common sense to them.

The bite-mark evidence was admitted. Marx was convicted. The dentists were off to the races.

The Marx trial set a precedent: Once bite-mark evidence had been allowed in court, prosecutors began putting dentists on the stand across the nation. And bite-mark analysis was just one of many “feature-comparison” forensic methods that took off in the 1970s and ’80s. Technical evidence from crime scenes had been used in investigations and prosecutions for more than a century. (New York City set up a fingerprint bureau in 1903.) But now the field exploded, with practitioners claiming remarkable precision in matching tire-tread marks to specific cars, vague footprints to particular shoes, or stray hairs to alleged perpetrators. Ballistics, tool marks, blood-splatter analysis—we’re all familiar with these techniques because we’ve seen them used in a thousand episodes of CSI and other crime dramas.

As with bite marks, these methods were developed not to answer scientific questions but to serve the needs of prosecutors. The techniques were never tested in a laboratory. No independent groups tried to establish their accuracy. In actual science, claims are routinely challenged. The results of experiments aren’t accepted until other scientists have replicated them. But the growing cadre of “forensic scientists” had no incentive to question their colleagues’ claims or test their proficiency. Forensic experts enjoyed the esteem of their colleagues and the satisfaction of helping put bad guys in jail. Many made good livings testifying in criminal trials. A few, such as “pathologist to the stars” Michael Baden, became bona fide celebrities. Why rock the boat by demanding scientific evidence that the techniques really worked?

JAMES B. MEIGS is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a co-host of the How Do We Fix It podcast, and the former editor of Popular Mechanics.
This doesn't mean all forensic evidence is worthless or that forensic experts are all charlatans. But it does mean that, until recently at least, we've had no way of knowing how accurate a supposed match between, say, bits of fiber or a bullet and a gun barrel might be. On the stand, forensic specialists have every incentive to exaggerate their certainty and to downplay any scientific doubt or ambiguity in their findings. One of the most notorious pioneers of bite-mark analysis was once asked to specify his error rate. “Something less than my savior, Jesus Christ,” he answered.

Those boom times for forensic experts were also a boon for prosecutors, especially those whose cases were otherwise shaky. By the 1990s, thousands of suspects each year were being convicted on the strength of testimony from forensic experts.

M. Chris Fabricant, director of strategic litigation for the Innocence Project, fights to overturn flawed convictions and free prisoners who were unjustly imprisoned. Many of his cases involve bogus forensic evidence. He believes that the media's credulous portrayal of forensic work—which in fictional or “true-crime” stories—is part of the problem. “Jurors go into court with the expectation of two things,” he said when I recently interviewed him for a podcast. “One, that there will be scientific evidence available, and Two, that that evidence will be conclusive. And that's just not the reality of our legal system at all.”

Fabricant's new book, *Junk Science and the American Criminal Justice System*, chillingly recounts case after case in which juries, awed by the supposed expertise of forensic analysts, overlooked alibis and other exonerating evidence in order to convict suspects. Some of these falsely convicted men spent decades on death row.

But then along came DNA. Unlike other forms of forensic evidence, analysis of crime-scene DNA underwent serious scientific scrutiny. Once some early problems were sorted out, it became a reliable method to connect a particular suspect to a particular crime. In the early 1990s, it also became a way to prove the innocence of the unjustly convicted. In more than 300 cases since then, the Innocence Project has been able to prove the lack of guilt of its clients through the testing of old crime-scene DNA. Many of those false convictions had been based on testimony from leading experts in forensic science. In other words, this wave of DNA exonerations revealed that the supposedly rock-solid forensic evidence presented at trials was often little more than speculation—if not fraudulent.

In 2009, the National Academy of Science issued a blistering report challenging a whole gamut of forensic techniques. The report concluded that “much forensic evidence—including, for example, bitemarks and firearm and toolmark identifications—is introduced in criminal trials without any meaningful scientific validation, determination of error rates, or reliability testing to explain the limits of the discipline.” Of all the forensic methods commonly presented at trials, the NAS said, the only type of evidence that could reliably link suspects to crimes was DNA. Other studies have documented high error rates for hair analysis, techniques to identify bullets through metallurgical testing—even fingerprint identification turns out to be far less reliable than most of us imagine.

These critical studies have sparked modest reform in the forensics field, including efforts to document the scientific basis of certain techniques. But there has been a lot of pushback as well. Despite all the research casting doubt on forensic overreach, too many prosecutors just can't quit the practice. And too many judges still allow dubious forensic evidence in their courtrooms. Bite-mark evidence, perhaps the shakiest of all forensic methods, is still admissible in all 50 states. And that's a scandal.

Activists on the left have long been skeptical of law enforcement, and many want to roll back the extraordinary power our legal system grants prosecutors. On the other hand, most conservatives (libertarians aside) reflexively tend to trust law enforcement. Crime is a real and growing problem, after all. And dangerous criminals belong in jail. In recent years, though, the Justice Department's dishonest campaign against Donald Trump opened conservatives' eyes to the ways law-enforcement officials can abuse their powers. There was a faction in the FBI that was sure Trump was guilty of something, so they set out to find the crime—or invent one. Many false convictions based on junk science show a similar pattern on a smaller scale. Investigators and prosecutors find a suspect they assume is guilty, and then they rely on shoddy evidence—or manufactured evidence—to prove their case. In Fabricant's words, they “paint a bull's-eye around a target.”

Conservatives and liberals alike should be outraged when the state abuses its vast investigative prosecutorial powers in this way. Our justice system is built on the idea that ordinary citizens are fully capable of determining guilt or innocence. Junk forensic science is dangerous because it aims to supersede that commonsense judgement. Our forensic experts have arcane scientific knowledge, prosecutors tell juries. You lay people can't possibly understand it, so just trust them. They're experts, after all.

That's not the American way. These revelations about bad forensic science should remind us never to abandon our own judgement or put all our trust in the cult of the experts. All too often, they are just making it up as they go along. And *CSI* is just a TV show.
The Wedding Canopy in Abu Dhabi

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

It was a video that went viral in the Orthodox Jewish world. Levi Duchman, a young Chabad rabbi ministering to the growing Jewish community in the United Arab Emirates, was married to Leah Hadad in the middle of September, one week before Rosh Hashanah. The ritual was traditional, and Hasidic, and centered, like all Jewish weddings, around a chuppah, a wedding canopy. But the occasion was, from a historical perspective, extraordinary: It was held in Abu Dhabi, the 1,500-person guest list made up of both Jews and Arabs, including Emirati royalty, with rabbis arriving from Israel, America, and Morocco. It was the largest Jewish event ever held in the Gulf Region.

One video captures a moment after the chuppah ceremony: the dancing with the groom in which all engage. As Jewish music is played and sung, we see Rabbi Duchman, a Hasid clad in kapote and black hat, dancing in the center of the circle with an Emirati Arab guest, wrapped in his own traditional white thobe and headdress, with similarly clad Hasidim and Arabs surrounding them, holding hands and revolving to the rhythm, the white robes and black frocks blending together, creating a moving mosaic of friendship and faith. When the video was first sent to me, I stared at it. Had I seen it 10 years ago, I would have assumed that it was a scene from a movie comedy, so incongruous did the pairings seem. Yet the video is real, the scene is real, the warmth and the joy of all those dancing together are real. And the date for the wedding was deliberately chosen by bride and groom: September 15, the second anniversary of the signing of the Abraham Accords.

It is a fitting testimony to all that has been achieved since the Accords were first signed: a wedding marked by the one Diaspora Jewish community on earth that, as Rabbi Duchman proudly notes, can now receive kosher Israeli goods directly by truck from the State of Israel, in a country whose relationship with the Jewish state only continues to develop.

It is striking therefore that as the wedding marked the anniversary of the historic agreement, the astounding success of the Accords still continues to be denied in publications whose own “expertise” was so challenged by the Accords themselves. We are told that...
the failure of the compact to address the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is a fatal flaw. “Why the Abraham Accords Fall Short,” one headline in Foreign Policy declared several months ago, with the subhead: “Sidelines the Palestinians Is a Recipe for Violence, Not Peace.”

Then, on the anniversary, another article in Foreign Policy informed its readers that “Two Years Later, the Abraham Accords Are Losing Their Luster” because their achievements “are overshadowed by the intensification of conflict with the Palestinians.” The agreement, we are further told, “may have raised Israel’s regional profile, but that didn’t translate into a spirit of generosity with the problem closest at hand.”

The spirit of the articles hearkens back to the snarky comment made in 2020 by the Atlantic’s Jeffrey Goldberg about naming the Accords for the biblical patriarch: “My personal preference would have been to deploy the big gun himself, Abraham, the father of monotheism, for a peace treaty between Israelis and Palestinians, which would be the thing that actually ended that Middle East conflict.”

All this, of course, gets it exactly wrong. The further warming of the Emirati-Israeli relationship in the face of tensions with Palestinians—however regrettable those tensions might be—reflects the strength of the Accords, and their central insight: the fact that one localized conflict over the future of Judea and Samaria need not be “solved” in order to build bridges to the rest of the Arab world and to the Muslim world beyond. And as former Israeli Ambassador Ron Dermer has pointed out, building on what has been achieved to attain a formalized relationship with Saudi Arabia could indeed end the “Arab–Israeli conflict”—even if an accord with the Palestinians has yet to be reached.

In fact, this one Hasidic wedding in Abu Dhabi, forever binding a rabbi’s wedding anniversary to that of the Abraham Accords, embodies, in a sublime and symbolic way, why the name of the agreement is so apt. The chuppah, the canopy, is the representation of the home that the Jewish husband and wife intend to build lovingly together in the future. And yet, superficially, it’s an odd sort of home to build: no boundaries between public and private, open to the breezes on all four sides. Some explain that the structure makes sense when it is perceived as an echo of Abraham, whose desert tent, according to Talmudic tradition, had open doors on all four of its sides.

Rabbinic literature explains that the open sides symbolized the patriarch’s embrace of all those who would come upon him, while highlighting his commitment to bear the monotheistic message to the four corners of the earth. Under the chuppah, then, standing in the metaphorical shadow of Abraham’s tent, a Jewish husband and wife likewise commit themselves to the Abrahamic mission while showing their openness to those beyond.

It is therefore difficult to think of a better symbol of the Abraham Accords than this wedding: a tent of Abraham built by a Jewish groom embracing his Abrahamic cousins, with the embrace warmly reciprocated. And it is not only strategic concerns but also the spirit of Abrahamic faith that has helped further these remarkable developments in the Gulf.

This can be seen in the sheikh chosen by Saudi Arabia to deliver the central sermon in this year’s Mecca hajj pilgrimage: Mohammed al-Issa, who is known for his 2020 trip to Auschwitz, the first senior Muslim cleric to journey there.

Several weeks before the sermon, I was part of a group of Jewish visitors that met with the sheikh in Saudi Arabia. In a moving and unforgettable conversation, he described the concern that led him to journey to the concentration camp, how inspired he had been by an encounter with the president and students of Yeshiva University, his adulation of the writings of Maimonides, and what Judaism and Islam have in common. If even more progress is made, it will be with the help of spiritual leaders like him.

It is impossible to predict what will happen next, and when. But awe is the only appropriate reaction to the Abraham Accords anniversary wedding in Dubai, and all that it reflects. And a bit of history will only add to the wonder. Several articles noted that while Rabbi Duchman ministers to Jews in the Emirates today, his great-grandfather lived a very different life: He had been sent by the Soviets to Siberia, imprisoned for his faith activities. It was in Siberia, following four years in the Gulag, that he was married. The ceremony involved a makeshift wedding ring fashioned from a spoon, given by groom to bride under the chuppah.

The miraculous nature of Jewish history is suddenly and transcendentally realized. Standing in Siberia, in a frozen wasteland, a Jewish couple erected a chuppah in memory of their ancestor Abraham, joining themselves to his faith and his family. They could not have imagined—though I think they would have believed—that one day their descendant would erect another wedding tent of Abraham in the Middle Eastern desert, in a place where not long ago no Jewish life existed, and would mark the moment by rejoicing with other descendants of Abraham, Arabs embracing Jews at the moment that is the very epitome of Jewish joy.

Only a truly stultified or cynical soul could resist awe at a Jewish Abu Dhabi wedding such as this. And only a student of history insufficiently humbled by what has occurred could resist wondering at all that has happened, as well as what is yet to be.
A FOREIGN CONSUMER of U.S. news might reasonably conclude that the famous American work ethic is in sharp decline. The shutdowns and school closures of 2020–21 taught the nation’s workers that they could stop working for months at no great personal or societal cost. Governmental policies allegedly meant to assist workers affected by the pandemic—forgivable loans to employers, multiple subventions to all, a moratorium on evictions—encouraged many to believe that work was a nonessential, and possibly harmful, part of life.

This mass exodus from the working world, termed the Great Resignation by economists, ought to sound like terrible news to any ordinary person. A man who doesn’t work doesn’t flourish, and the same is true.

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of a society. In his 2016 book, *Men Without Work*, Nicholas Eberstadt chronicled the slow, steady exit of working-age men from the American economy—an exit not reflected in the unemployment rate, which tracks only the number of people looking for employment. The social consequences Eberstadt describes are dire: drug addiction, crime (both “petty” and violent), dependency, family break-up, deaths of despair. The political response to Covid-19, as Eberstadt explains in a post-pandemic reissue of the book, has only hastened the exodus.

But to the writers and readers of fashionable liberal opinion, the decline of America’s work ethic is a reason for chirpy optimism. The *New York Times*, in a perhaps unconscious effort to discover evidence that the onerous pandemic restrictions the paper championed weren’t the disaster they plainly were, has published a series of pieces on how the pandemic changed our “approach to work.” One article claimed many people quit their jobs for better-paying ones; another told stories of workers quitting their jobs to find a better “work-life balance”; another documented the ways in which quitting encouraged healthy and liberating expressions of workers’ grievances. Still another documented the experience of a nonprofit executive who resigned from her job and “reconnected” with her family. Not working is wonderful!

Elsewhere in the media one encounters story after story about Americans working less, very few of them including any suggestion that there might be something to worry about. Efforts in several states to impose a 32-hour workweek; the phenomenon of “quiet quitting” in which employees stick it to their bosses by curtailing their effort; the renewed popularity of “pro-natal” policies in which the government relieves new parents from the burdens of remunerative labor; claims by academic theorists that terms such as “work ethic” and “hard work” are outgrowths of white supremacy—all receive positive, often celebratory, treatment.

American political rhetoric hasn’t caught up with the trend. The word “work” has long held an almost sacred status in American political life, and still does. Public officials of both parties regularly speak of citizens as “hardworking Americans” or “hardworking taxpayers,” and even the ones who champion every expansion of the welfare state frequently speak about the “dignity” of work and sentimentalize their own hardscrabble upbringing and long-laboring moms and pops. “Joey, remember,” President Biden recently claimed his father used to say, “a job is about a lot more than a paycheck. It’s about your dignity. It’s about respect. It’s about your place in the community.” The words sound like the script of a Lifetime movie, and I assume Biden Sr. never said any such thing. But the fact that the president felt he needed to remind his supporters that work is good, not bad, suggests that something has gone amiss in the national understanding of work.

The best way to get at this problem is to ask the most basic question: What is work?

*HERE IS A LONG tradition in Western nations of doubting the intrinsic value of work. The poet William Wordsworth and the journalist William Cobbett, among others in the early-19th century, worried that industrial labor was monotonous and soul-killing in a way that agricultural work was not. Radicals and Marxists in the late-19th and early-20th centuries spun this apprehension into elaborate ideologies in which oppressed workers, having finally thrown off their exploiters, would pursue meaningful, ennobling work in an abuse-free eschaton.*

To give that tradition its due, one must acknowledge that some forms of works aren’t “dignified” in any obvious way, and no young person aspires to a life spent pursuing them: disposing of carcasses in a chicken-processing plant, cleaning dishes, taking inventory in the warehouse of a wholesale distributor, delivering pizza, collecting garbage. Yet these jobs must be done, we are all grateful that they are done, and some people possess the strength of soul to do them well.

But the question is: Is there a difference between dignified and undignified work? There is, but the difference does not consist, as today’s progressives would assume, in the material conditions of the workers. What distinguishes dignified and undignified work is its aim. I think of a passage in Dostoevsky’s *House of the Dead* in which Aleksandr, the narrator, observes that hard labor with a purpose is infinitely better than easy labor without one.

Hard labor, as it is now carried on, presents no interest to the convict; but it has its utility. The convict makes bricks, digs the earth, builds; and all his occupations have a meaning and an end. Sometimes, even the prisoner takes an interest in what he is doing. He then wishes to work more skillfully, more advantageously. But let him be constrained to pour water from one vessel into another, or to transport a quantity of earth from one place to another, in order to perform the contrary operation immediately afterwards, then I am persuaded that at the end of a few days the prisoner would strangle himself or commit a thousand crimes, punish-
able with death, rather than live in such an abject condition and endure such torments.

Both forms of work Aleksandr mentions here—making bricks and building things, on the one hand, and pouring water into vessels and moving around piles of dirt, on the other—are grueling and terrible. Both are carried out in abject, inhumane conditions. But the prisoner who builds things does so in order that other human beings may enjoy the results, and the prisoner who moves around dirt does so for no reason. The latter's work is undignified. He goes mad doing it.

The prisoner who makes bricks may not even like the people who will benefit from the bricks. Presumably he does not like them at all. The point is that the work has a purpose, a usefulness to humans.

Most work in most places is not done by prisoners who dislike the beneficiaries of their work. Most work is done by people who have at least some respect for their clients and patrons. I think of my father. For about 25 years he owned and ran a small oceanfront lodge, The Viking, on the South Carolina coast. The guests were mostly working-class families, and many of them returned year after year because it was a clean, well-run, and affordable place to spend a week at the beach. Running such a place is not an easy way to make a living. The patrons of a restaurant or an auto-repair shop vacate the premises after it closes, but the guests in an inn are always there. One of them could set off a fire alarm or fall off a balcony or clog a toilet at any time, day or night. My father liked most of the guests very much; all of them he respected.

What gave his work dignity was not that he performed it in adequate material conditions, or that he received a certain level of pay for it. What gave it dignity was that it afforded his guests a measure of delight. Economists would call what my father did “value creation,” but this charmless term robs the concept of its beauty. He didn't simply create something people found good enough to purchase, namely, a clean oceanfront room for a certain number of days. He gave them a week or so of affordable freedom from worry and toil, a break in their routine, a room cleaned by others, a feeling of liberation and happiness. That is the core of dignified work: It blesses somebody else.

The HEBREW AND Christian scriptures locate the meaning of work in God's creation of the world in six days and His resting from that work on the seventh. His creative activity wasn't busywork carried out as a noble example for others to follow. He made things and then made creatures to enjoy those things. The text of Genesis places great emphasis on the gifts afforded to man. "And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat." Not just to man but to every other living thing, too. "And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so."

The first to work with a meaning and an end was God Himself.

There is a wonderful pair of questions and answers in the Westminster Shorter Catechism of 1647 that captures this understanding of work. The catechisms, shorter and larger, were didactic devices based on the Westminster Confession, the Calvinist statement of faith worked out during the English Civil War by Scottish and English clergymen and theologians. In one section the catechisms ask what each of the Ten Commandments forbids and requires. The Shorter Catechism (the one memorized by many generations of Presbyterian children) asks these questions about the Eighth Commandment, the one prohibiting theft.

Q. 74. What is required in the eighth commandment?
A. The eighth commandment requireth the lawful procuring and furthering the wealth and outward estate of ourselves and others.

Q. 75. What is forbidden in the eighth commandment?
A. The eighth commandment forbiddeth whatsoever doth or may unjustly hinder our own or our neighbor's wealth or outward estate.

I've added the emphasis. Each prohibition, in the Westminster divines' conception, requires its opposite, and so the ban on theft demands the obedient lover of God both to get wealth and outward estate for himself and others, and then to further it. That, in essence, is the "Protestant work ethic" so badly misunderstood by Max Weber as a desperate need to prove one's election by the exhibition of wealth.

In 1649 the divines added scriptural citations to the catechisms, and the first passage cited for #74 was Genesis 30:30. This is Jacob telling Laban, his uncle, that he wishes to move away with his wives and children: "And he said unto him, Thou knowest how I have served thee, and how thy cattle was with me. For it was little which thou hadst before I came, and it is now increased unto a multitude; and the Lord hath

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blessed thee since my coming: and now when shall I provide for mine own house also?” In the Westminster exegetes’ view, Jacob’s activities, benefitting as they did himself and his unscrupulous but lawful employer, captures the meaning of the Eighth Commandment’s prohibition on theft. Work yields something useful or delightful to somebody else. Another person gains by it.

The crucial point about this Jewish and Christian understanding of work, as I think it is, is that it happily allows self-interest to be part of the duty of aiding and blessing others. God created the world for His own glory and for the benefit of man. Jacob multiplied livestock for himself and because he liked and respected his guests and enjoyed seeing them happy. The famous “invisible hand” passage in Adam Smith’s Wealth of Nations (1776) is often recruited to illustrate this principle. The individual merchant, Smith writes,

neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention.

Smith was not saying, and did not believe, that people, if not interfered with, simply enrich themselves and one another. But his observation does assume that a person can pursue his own welfare and, without making it his conscious goal, contribute to the general welfare, too.

Alexis de Tocqueville expresses a closely related idea when, in volume 2 of Democracy in America, he reflects on the planner and more robust sort of virtue he saw in the ordinary American citizen. He called it “self-interest well understood.” It was a limited, plainer, more useful idea than classical conceptions of virtue that strove for selflessness and achieved sublimity. “The doctrine of self-interest well understood,” he writes, “does not produce great devotion; but it suggests little sacrifices each day; by itself it cannot make a man virtuous; but it forms a multitude of citizens who are regulated, temperate, moderate, farsighted, masters of themselves; and if it does not lead directly to virtue through the will, it brings them near to it insensibly through habits.” The self-interested man,

in Tocqueville’s sense, is diligent and conscientious in his little sphere of life, and this affords small gains to everyone who comes across that sphere.

OCQUEVILLE SAW that the diligent, resourceful Americans he witnessed did not lack virtue simply because they made money by their work. For others—Marxists and other radicals in the 19th century, leftists of various kinds in the 20th, progressives in the 21st—the noblest kind of work is selfless, altruistic, sacrificial. Are they right?

In a word, no. The presence of a monetary exchange is a good indication that someone has gained. It’s not the only indication that genuine work has been done, and not an infallible one, but it’s a pretty reliable signal that something good has been created and conveyed to someone else. If someone is willing to pay for a bouquet of flowers, that is strong evidence that the bouquet was put together well enough to afford a spot of happiness in the life of another person. A monetary exchange also makes it more likely that other, similarly fetching bouquets will be made. Financial transactions signify valuable work in other areas of life, too, not only in business. A police officer, say, provides a service people pay for. He deters crime and arrests criminals and curbs dangerous behavior, and municipalities purchase his labor with public revenue. The same may be said of garbage collectors. Their service, when done well and on time, is worth paying them ample sums to do it. And when they do it, there is dignity.

A great deal of work in 21st-century America still fits this description. Millions of people do superb work that benefits their friends, family, neighbors, customers, and clients. But here is a sad thing. Public discourse is America is dominated by the very people whose work doesn’t fit that description. A great deal of work undertaken by people in these sectors isn’t useful to anyone. No one wants it. No one is blessed or pleased or advantaged by it. No one would willingly pay his own money, or make any sacrifice at all, to procure it.

At its worst, this part of American life resembles the 1991 film Slacker, a plotless sequence of scenes in which youngish residents of Austin spend their energies on weird tasks that benefit no one—building yard decorations that symbolize the menstrual cycle, throwing a typewriter off a bridge in an act of male solidarity, discussing the philosophical import of the Smurfs, attempting to hawk a pap smear supposedly originating from the pop singer Madonna. Today’s elite skeptics of the work ethic don’t appear so risible as that, but they have this in common with the Austin
weirdos. Both think a thing is worth doing because someone feels like doing it, whether it has use for other people or not.

Consider these four sectors: government, higher education, consultancy, and nonprofit. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of these areas of labor. Each includes individuals and organizations that make positive contributions to their surroundings and the nation generally. But none of these sectors is known primarily for producing things that people like enough to make sacrifices in order to attain. And each is full of people who do very little work that can fairly be called useful or beneficial. That these four sectors loom so large in our corporate life tends to distort what Americans think about value, work, and reality.

Government. It’s easy to ridicule government and its officials for producing nothing of measurable value, but of course it isn’t a proper function of government to produce things, useful or not. Government doesn’t build roads, for example; it pays other people to build them. The prospect of profit is rightly absent from government’s remit.

Still it’s worth recalling how unproductive government is. The agency worker doesn’t need to work hard and well in order to maximize profits, or to keep his job, because there are no profits and there is very little chance he will lose his job. The result, in addition to much necessary provision, is a lot of unnecessary activity that pleases no one. In the absence of any metric for success or accomplishment, employees can’t be let go easily, or at all, and something must be found for them to do.

Read a typical story in the mainstream press, and it will include observations by a bureaucrat, an academic, a consultant, and an activist. The premise of the story will relate to some governmental decision, and the reporter will seek comment from (a) the government official responsible for the decision or the official’s spokesman; (b) an academic—Professor of Specialized Topic at the Impressive School of Acclaimed University, an “expert in workplace psychology,” or “an expert in creative placemaking,” or some other alleged thing a person can be an expert in; (c) a consultant—someone who “advises companies and governments” on Vogue Cultural Topic, or who is a Republican/Democratic “political strategist”; and (d) an activist—an “advocate for women’s health” or the Director of the Center for Getting Government to Do Things. At no point in these stories will you hear from anyone whose job it is to make things or provide services that other human beings enjoy and profit from sufficiently to pay their own money for.

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* This is a real thing. “The nominee, Maria Rosario Jackson, is a recognized expert in creative placemaking, a process that leverages arts, culture and design to spur economic development in communities and promote social change”: New York Times, “Nominee to Arts Endowment Sees Culture as an Economic Force,” October 11, 2021, page C6.
addition to the many hundreds of thousands of positions the federal government employs, for the most part properly: soldiers, law-enforcement investigators, intelligence gatherers, prison guards, meteorologists, information technicians of every kind, and so on. There is nothing wrong with any of these lines of work. In the abstract, they may all be good and necessary. But because they are governmental, it is difficult to know how valuable and necessary their work product is. People don’t pay for it in the ordinary sense; it’s paid for by elected budget-writers and procurement officers who often don’t know what they’re purchasing. City councilors know more or less what they’re purchasing when they allot a certain amount for the police force; they do not know what they’re purchasing when they devote a line item in the city budget for diversity officers or “creative placemakers.”

*Activist.* The nonprofit world grows as fast as government does. It is in most cases consciously designed to influence government, and each new growth in governmental power and resources presents the aptly termed nonprofit sector with a new opportunity of influence.

The esteem in which activists and agitators are held, at least among the hypereducated upper-middle-class busbodies who run developed nations in the West, can hardly be exaggerated. The word “activist,” as it’s commonly used in the news media, sometimes signifies a person with a paid position at a nonprofit organization or a political action committee. But often it simply means a full-time scold and fomenter of allegedly well-intentioned trouble: “climate activist,” “reproductive-rights activist,” “food activist.” Such a person would reject this description of his activities and point to the laudable aims for which he stands. He opposes the use of trans-fatty acids in school lunches. He wants tougher laws on drunk drivers and price-gougers and child abusers. He wants to save marshlands from development and women from the cruelty of abortion regulations. Some of these aims are nobler than others, but it is fair to ask: Who gauges their value?

The answer is, they do. The typical activist and nonprofit fomenter looks with scorn on the private sector, where (as they think) things are done only for monetary gain. But the private sector at least has a metric of success external to itself—namely, profit. Private companies define their success by whether they’re making money, and by that standard many of them fail and cease to exist. Activists define their own value and gauge their own success, and not surprisingly they perform consistently well.

Nonprofit organizations are meant in part to give structure and accountability to activism. They have boards of directors and donor bases, and if the nonprofits become ineffective, donors stop giving. That is the theory, anyway. But there are problems. The founder of the nonprofit championing the rights of disadvantaged women may be an honest and hard-working person, but the nonprofit class is full of people who spend the bulk of their energies inventing fictional injustices and pretending to fight them.

The nonprofit sector does produce valuable work at the margins, but perverse incentives are part of its nature. The average nonprofit organization begins when someone sees an injustice or a problem in society, usually though not always one perpetuated by government policy. The organization takes on that problem and meets with a small measure of success. Its donors thrill to the news and encourage it to do more. But eventually the problem subsides on its own or evolves into some other problem. Or, more typically, those wanting to solve the problem come to realize its total intractability. Either way, the nonprofit’s leaders and staff, obliged as they are to demonstrate their value to donors, quietly shift their aims to lesser, more manageable goals. The nonprofit grows and becomes an institution itself, with staff, traditions, a building, a brand, a base of supporters. Now it exists for its own sake, separate from its original goals. Eventually it becomes easier for the nonprofit to create fictional problems and fake accomplishments in a perpetual effort to keep the money flowing.

Not all but many of these organizations exist largely for their own sake. They employ or hire lobbyists, and the lobbyists hobnob with politicos and occasionally get a proviso stripped from a bill or a regulation rewritten in a favorable way. These will count as major “accomplishments” in the cause of freedom or animal rights or humane governance or trans rights or whatever. Many other organizations don’t even get that far; they haven’t precipitated a quantifiable policy change, even a minuscule one, in decades. But all of them are skilled in telling their wealthy supporters and government grant-issuing agencies what wonderful work they do and how indispensable they are.

*Academic.* Idleness is the particular vice of mandarins. When you elevate an entire class of people on the grounds that they know things and are able to tell us what they know, they will soon get used to knowing things and not doing much of anything. The knowledge class’s proneness to vanity and folly is a danger in any society. The problem arises when there is no demand for the things the experts know, and they begin to produce those things for reasons of self-preservation, institutional expectations, vanity, or idiocy. The institution employing the expert asks him
to enhance his expertise and to teach and write about it, but the institution does so exclusively in order to enhance its own prestige and attract more “investment” from the government and financial gifts from donors.

Jonathan Swift memorably parodied the vain delusions of state-supported or otherwise cosseted experts in Lemuel Gulliver’s visit to the Academy of Lagado. The narrator visits one expert after another, each engaged in a preposterous project in which no rational person will ever have the slightest interest: a blind professor famous for teaching his blind students to distinguish the colors of paints by “feeling and smelling”; an architect who had devised a method of building houses from the roof down; an agricultural innovator who has developed a new way to plow fields by burying acorns, dates, and chestnuts in rows and having hogs dig them up. The first room visited by Gulliver, though, is worth quoting in full:

The first Man I saw was of a meagre Aspect, with sooty Hands and Face, his Hair and Beard long, ragged, and singed in several places. His Clothes, Shirt, and Skin were all of the same Colour. He had been eight Years upon a Project for extracting Sunbeams out of Cucumbers, which were to be put into Vials hermetically Sealed, and let out to warm the Air in raw inclement Summers. He told me, he did not doubt in eight Years more, he should be able to supply the Governor’s Gardens with Sunshine at a reasonable Rate; but he complained that his Stock was low, and entreated me to give him something as an Encouragement to ingenuity, especially since this had been a very dear Season for Cucumbers. I made him a small Present, for my Lord had furnished me with Money on purpose, because he knew their Practice of begging from all who go to see them.

That this hirsute expert requires government grants to continue his work gives the episode added relevance.

Of all the just complaints made against the modern university, the fact that it produces enormous quantities of knowledge that no one wants is the most under-discussed. No one wants to read a monograph about phallic metaphors in early-modern poetry—no one, that is, except a few scholars in the field of early-modern poetry, who only skim the monograph in order to cite it in their own, equally useless, monographs. But no one, literally no one, wants the book for its own sake, and no one would pay his own money for the purpose of enjoying it. That’s an extreme example, but not a hypothetical one, and the principle obtains, to varying degrees, across all disciplines. Survey the catalogues of academic presses, especially the second-tier ones and below, and you find a vast number of books that no one wants to read and no one will ever seek out. Survey the course offerings, and it’s plain that many academics are permitted to teach on subjects no one cares about and no one ever will, and that their lectures are attended mainly by students trying to fill course requirements and move on to graduation, not by people genuinely hoping to learn.

The upshot is that the relationship between buyer (student) and seller (university) is hopelessly deformed. The two barely know each other. Most students aren’t enrolled because they want the educational product, and most administrators and faculty aren’t there to provide it. Administrators, especially the ever-multiplying numbers of “coordinators” at the larger institutions, exist for the sake of the university and its various fiefdoms. Most do jobs that have no connection to the people actually paying the bills, and it’s not at all clear who those people even are. Parents? Taxpayers? Scholarship-granting organizations? Certainly not the people supposedly benefiting from the service: students. Faculty, meanwhile, are in practice hired by other faculty, and their longevity in their positions does not depend on whether they do their jobs well or poorly. The tenured may do their jobs abysmally and remain on the payroll indefinitely. What faculty are certainly not required to do, in any case, is teach well in order to keep students interested in attending.

These pathologies badly distort the understanding of work in our university-based mandarin class. That sounds harsh, but the point here is not to criticize the quality of instruction and scholarship produced by today’s academics, some significant minority of whom are brilliant scholars who contribute tremendously to the lives of their students. The point, rather, is that today’s higher-education system—insanely expensive, bloated with administrators, abounding in bogus scholarship and instruction that no one will ever want—promotes the sort of twisted and amoral understanding of work Jonathan Swift parodied in Gulliver.

What prevails on university campuses is the assumption that whatever faculty and administrators are doing should, in fact, be done and indeed deserves a protected, privileged sphere in which to do it. That assumption produces about what an ordinary person would predict: a mania for expensive new facilities, never-ending mission creep, departments and disciplines premised on bizarre crotchets and unfalsifiable theories, draconian and ever-changing “speech codes,” and on and on.

Consultant. The basic idea behind consultancy
in the modern sense is that it offers a way for someone with relevant understanding and experience to give advice to those who need it. A typical and legitimate form of consultancy might go like this: A person spends two or three decades working for a large nuclear-power company. He knows a lot about the safe transfer of nuclear fuel. Eventually he leaves or retires from the company. He becomes a “consultant,” perhaps opening his own firm for the purpose, by advising companies, either the one he retired from or other ones, on how to minimize danger in the shipping of nuclear fuel. In that case, the consultant is doing work that has intrinsic value. The company needs his work in order to succeed at some new venture, and it pays an amount set more or less by the market to have that work done.

But that is usually not how consultancy works. In the far more ordinary circumstance, the consultant provides work that has no intrinsic value. Ordinarily the consultant offers his service to government officials or the managers of massive dysfunctional corporations. These are happy to shovel large amounts of money to the consultant because they have no accurate sense of who the money belongs to and no interest in figuring out what a fair market price might be.

Think first of political consultants. This consultant’s client is either a government agency or a person running for office. In that sense the consultant is like any government contractor: Both produce things that people purchase with other people’s money. In the case of a government contractor, though, the quality of his product can be measured using more or less objective criteria. Its quality may be measured imperfectly, and by government officials who don’t know what they’re measuring, but a construction company can’t deliver a gravel driveway when it was hired to build an interstate overpass, and a defense firm hired to produce missiles can’t send the Pentagon a truckload of espresso machines.

The political consultant can do something almost as ridiculous, and frequently does. A political campaign hires a consultant to win an election. The candidate wins. But how do we know whether it was the consultant’s services—polling, messaging, ads, a “ground game,” whatever that means—that delivered the win? A thousand factors might have swayed the electorate to support one candidate or the other, fact-
agency requires companies to disclose the environmental impact of some operation. But the company can’t “disclose” that information because the “impact” depends on a host of interpretive assumptions. The company will have to make up something that sounds credible. To do that, and to demonstrate its intention to comply with the mandate, it hires a consultancy to conduct a study and produce a report. The work this consultancy does has no actual value. It is, in essence, bogus. No one would seek it out, no one would purchase it—except for the arbitrary governmental regulations making it necessary. You can’t blame the company for hiring the consultancy—it has little choice—but the consultancy produces nothing of any genuine worth or usefulness. This sort of consultancy doesn’t have to know what it’s doing or what it’s talking about; it only needs to know how to sound as if it doesn’t have to know what it’s doing or what it’s talking about.

SOME READERS will contest one part or another of these descriptions, but this much I hope is beyond objection: that (a) large and growing segments of America’s culture and economy are devoted to forms of labor that produce nothing that any actual person would want badly enough to hand over his own money to attain; and that (b) the people engaged in these forms of work are afforded commensurately increasing levels of influence on American society.

The overwhelming majority of the nation’s workers do, in fact, earn their living because their work pleases other people sufficiently that they pay their own money for it: restauranteurs, owners of dry-cleaning and pest-control companies, managers of office-supply stores, accountants, janitors, nurses, oboists, makers of jewelry and coffee mugs sold at craft fairs. And thank God. If it weren’t for them, we wouldn’t have a country. None of this, I want to repeat, should be taken to mean that all government workers, nonprofit employees, activists, experts, academics, and consultants are doing fraudulent work. Plainly that is not true. The point, rather, is that these fields lend themselves more easily to various forms of pretense, fakery, and non-work because they mostly lack any external measure of value that might distinguish between purposeful work and meaningless activity.

When private companies “scale up,” to use the business jargon term to mean rapidly expand, they inevitably develop dysfunctions and inefficiencies. But companies, being at the mercy of profit, have a way to discern, and a reason to rid themselves of, those dysfunctions and inefficiencies. Where there is no market, or no direct market—i.e., where there is no obvious connection between buyer and seller—the dysfunctions and inefficiencies remain and worsen.

Government is necessary, but it’s very often unclear whether government is working or worth the expense. It’s significant that the most trusted and well-liked government employees are police officers and soldiers: The work of these two sorts of government employee has an immediate and obvious value, and any lack of success by them is sadly apparent. Activists and nonprofit employees can do much good, but they tend to become useless, or in some cases a nuisance, when their organizations become large. All civilized nations have experts and academics, but when they become too numerous, and when the number of fields in which they possess specialized knowledge multiplies irrationally, their arguments and interests become vain and silly, their institutions detached from reality. Consultancy at a small scale can offer genuine value for the buyer, but as a business model it almost always involves a high level of pretense: selling the appearance of work where no work has been done, peddling dumb ideas to large companies whose managers have lost a sense of what investors and shareholders want, persuading governmental figures to hand over large sums of other people’s money for products that don’t work.

The enlargement of these four sectors of the American economy helps to explain why some areas of our public life are, at present, so vexed.

Health care: Nearly the entire field is dominated by governmental regulators, academics with big ideas, busybody activists, and consultants who profit from the disconnect between buyer and seller.

K–12 education: The government runs much of it, academia fills it with bad theory and anti-Americanism, and consultants sell their ridiculous ideas to school-board procurement officers who have no idea what they’re buying.

The arts: Composers, artists, and poets are housed in universities and encouraged to generate recondite nonsense in the hopes of impressing government-funded grant-issuing bodies; soon they have no incentive to produce works that ordinary people want to hear, see, or read.

The results: a hopelessly convoluted health-care system, an education system of ever-increasing costs and ever-diminishing quality, and a cultural sphere that has produced precious little of anything important since 1945.

All the people in these sectors feel their work is dignified. And some of it is. But much of it has no dignity. It blesses no one. No one seeks it out. No one would make the slightest personal sacrifice in order to enjoy it.

Commentary
The Drag Queen Story Hour was dreamed up by people who have no demand for it. There is no revenue created by it. There is no product of the market. No one pays for it. There is no evidence that it has been made of the Drag Queen Story Hour, for in any case, the one most responsive to the others and the least generative of original ideas. By locating the source of our moral confusion in the market, traditionalist critics of "capitalism" are assailing the one place where genuine work—work in the ancient Jewish and Christian sense—most often takes place. The market may reproduce and in some cases magnify vices already abroad in society, but it is the only place where your work must, like God's work in creation, please or benefit somebody else. If it does not, you won't be doing it for much longer.

It is remarkable how often a certain kind of traditionalist critic of the market will highlight societal perversities that supposedly epitomize the moral anarchy of "unfettered capitalism" and the like but that do not, in fact, arise from the private sector at all. Much has been made of the Drag Queen Story Hour, for instance, in which cross-dressing eccentrics read books to children at local libraries. But this phenomenon is not a product of the market. No one pays for it. There was no demand for it. There is no revenue created by it. The Drag Queen Story Hour was dreamed up by people in the world of nonprofit activism, and it was and is facilitated by public libraries.

The alternately risible and chilling phenomenon of "woke capitalism," in which large corporations ostentatiously embracing the latest manifestations of radicalism, is not properly thought of as a market phenomenon. A soft-drink company runs an ad celebrating polyamory; an airline condemns the United States for its systemic racism; a fast-food chain aggressively promotes Pride Month; a host of multinational corporations announce that they will pay employees' travel costs incurred to obtain abortions. Stories of this kind appear to pit the private sector—the market—against traditional religious views and older habits of living. But these decisions by corporations are not the outcomes of market-driven decision-making. The fast-food company does not promote Pride Month (a creation, incidentally, of government and the nonprofit sector) to expand its presence in the lesbian and gay market. The company does so to satisfy the demands of activist investors, who don't care at all about the company's profits, and to avoid the denunciations of activists.

And whatever reasons there may be for all those multinational corporations to announce an intention to pay for abortion-related travel expenses after the fall of Roe v. Wade, the reason was not the profit motive. These were political decisions, born of ideology and panic and fear, not market decisions taken with the aim of increasing shareholder value.

Conservative writers may fulminate against the market for these and other offenses if they wish. They may reject "market fundamentalism" and ridicule other conservatives for believing that economic growth is necessarily good. But the cultural pathologies they deplore did not originate in the market. The sources of corporate radicalism are not the weak-kneed managers who sign off on virtue-signaling idiocies. The sources, rather, are Michel Foucault and Herbert Marcuse and the many other fanatics, frauds, and reactionaries—university employees almost to a man—who generated the ideas of which woke capitalism is a vast, nonsensical elaboration. Big Business has embraced anti-Americanism and identitarian obsessions because those pathologies were there to be embraced. Repairing all this wreckage will require many decades of patient argumentation and ordinary faithful living. The alternately risible and chilling phenomenon of "woke capitalism," in which large corporations ostentatiously embracing the latest manifestations of radicalism, is not properly thought of as a market phenomenon. A soft-drink company runs an ad celebrating polyamory; an airline condemns the United States for its systemic racism; a fast-food chain aggressively promotes Pride Month; a host of multinational corporations announce that they will pay employees' travel costs incurred to obtain abortions. Stories of this kind appear to pit the private sector—the market—against traditional religious views and older habits of living. But these decisions by corporations are not the outcomes of market-driven decision-making. The fast-food company does not promote Pride Month (a creation, incidentally, of government and the nonprofit sector) to expand its presence in the lesbian and gay market. The company does so to satisfy the demands of activist investors, who don't care at all about the company's profits, and to avoid the denunciations of activists.

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A Second Iranian Revolution?

The parallels are astonishing

By Ray Takeyh

The strange echoes of the 1970s over the past 18 months—with runaway inflation, an energy crisis, and an expansionist Russia—were startling enough. And then a revolt began in Iran, just as one did beginning in 1978. It features an aging autocrat who’s dying of cancer and overseeing a rebellious nation that has tired of his rule and the corruption of his cronies. History may not repeat itself, but it is surely rhyming in the streets of Tehran. And indeed, the best way to chart the possible trajectory of the current Iranian revolution is to look at the last one.

“Iran because of the leadership of the shah, is an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world,” said President Jimmy Carter during a visit to Iran in 1977. Although Carter’s unfortunate toast would be much ridiculed in the years ahead, it is important to note that until the last days of Mohammad Reza Shah’s Pahlavi dynasty, Western chancelleries and intelligence services as well as the foreign-policy intelligentsia were united in their belief that somehow the cagey monarch who had weathered so many crises would survive the latest one.

Behind the glitter of a rapidly modernizing and increasingly wealthy elite, Iran in the 1970s was a land of discontent. The corruption of the ruling class, the provocative social cleavages that sudden oil wealth generated, and the frustration of working in a system that discounted merit in favor of patronage and nepotism led many to join the rank of the opposition. In a paradoxical manner, the shah was bedeviled by his own success. He created a modern middle class but then refused to offer it a meaningful venue for politi-
Too often, we ignore the fact that national armies don’t like shooting their own people. A determined national protest movement can erode the morale of an army.

cal participation. His compact with his people was a transactional one, in which he exchanged financial rewards for political passivity. Even if Iran had not experienced a steep recession in the mid-1970s, this bargain would have been unsustainable. The Iranian masses wanted a say in how their nation was governed. Even more striking, the crass Westernization had a vast swath of the Iranian public eager to restore the central place of Shiite tradition.

Every revolution needs a spark, a watershed event after which things are not the same. In the early days of the Iranian revolution, which began in earnest in October 1977, the Iranian people were not calling for the disbanding of the monarchy but rather for meaningful constitutional reform. They wanted a free press, free political parties, and free elections. The intelligentsia wrote letters and petitions, the university students tore up their dorm rooms, the mullahs called for respecting religion in public life, and demonstrations were small and sporadic. In exile, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini thundered as the storm gathered.

This all changed in August 1978. On August 9, terrorists set ablaze Rex Cinema in the city of Abadan and killed 479 people. This was the most egregious act of arson in Iran’s modern history. Exiled in Iraq, Khomeini did a masterful job of blaming the Shah for the fire even though it was later revealed that Khomeini’s own followers had set it. The Rex Cinema bombing was an inflection point in the history of the revolution. Up until then, only the hardcore opponents of the Shah had participated in demonstrations. Now many fence-sitters began tilting toward the opposition. The size of the marches grew by the thousands as Iran’s uprising became a popular revolt with Khomeini as its leader. The Shah’s belated promises of reform were swept aside as no one could trust a leader who set his people on fire.

As significant as street protests were, it was the nationwide strikes that crippled the monarchy. A dynamic country suddenly went dark. Newspapers stopped publishing, electricity flickered, bazaars shut down, banks stopped processing transactions, and ports were filled with unprocessed cargo. Most important, Iranian oil production came to a halt. The country stopped functioning. In his palaces, the Shah, who was dying of cancer, brooded more than plotted and concocted various conspiracy theories to explain his predicament.

In the White House, Jimmy Carter assured himself that even if the Shah had lost his will, Iran’s armed forces could be counted on to restore order. He was not alone in this misapprehension, as most observers of Iran believed that the formidable army would seize the day. Too often, we ignore the fact that national armies don’t like shooting their own people. Battling foreign enemies and suppressing ethnic uprisings is different from going into neighborhoods day after day and killing civilians. A determined national protest movement can erode the morale of an army, shatter its cohesion, and lure conscripts away from their unenviable task of killing their countrymen.

The Shah fled, his army crumbled, and the revolution triumphed as one of the great populist revolts of modern history. It was all things to all people. For liberals, it was a chance to construct a representative government that was accountable to its citizens. For the devout, it was an opportunity to forge an order where religion informed politics. Islamic canons were seen as flexible enough to accommodate both faith and freedom. The Islamic Republic was to offer the hard-pressed masses cultural authenticity, a stable economy, and participatory politics. No one thought of theocratic absolutism as the endgame—except the clerics in charge.

The durability of the current Iranian regime cannot be attributed simply to brute force. The genius of the system is that it contains within its autocratic structure elected institutions that have little power but that still provide the public with some means of expressing their grievances. In the absence of such a safety valve, however superficial, the mullahs would have confronted even more protests than they have over the past two decades. The theocracy bears all the hallmarks of a dictatorship, but it has also maintained a thin veneer of collective action.

To become a revolutionary and risk one’s life for a cause that seems distant, if not improbable, is one of the most crucial decisions a citizen will make. All social protest movements battle against great odds; history has shown that most revolutions fail. The Islamic Republic offered the masses the opportunity to
participate in the national scene, but cleverly hemmed them in on all sides with clerical bodies who vetted candidates for public office. Still, when an average citizen is faced with the choice of rebelling against a vicious system or casting a ballot that will have a limited impact, he will probably opt for the latter.

The regime has had lively elections in which a diverse range of candidates made all sorts of promises. In the 1990s, Mohammad Khatami captured the national imagination by pledging to harmonize religious precepts with democratic norms. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is best remembered for his crass denials of the Holocaust—but at home, he spoke of fair wealth distribution. More recently, Hassan Rouhani insisted that his nuclear diplomacy would generate foreign investment and revive Iran's moribund economy. But none of these dreams materialized, and Iranians today are bereft of delusions. They know the theocracy remains in the grip of an unelected few and is drowning in corruption. The current uprising shows that the head mullah, Ayatollah Khamenei, forgot the most essential lesson of the shah's demise—that, at times, desperate masses have little choice but to revolt.

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The 2021 presidential election is likely to be remembered as the most consequential in the history of the Islamic Republic. As Khamenei, suffering from cancer, contemplated his succession, he sought to ensure a republic manned by his most reliable henchman and an economy immune to foreign sanctions. There was not even the pretense of a competitive race, as conservative stalwarts such as former speaker of the parliament Ali Larijani were disqualified from running. The presidency went to Ibrahim Raisi, a laconic and unimaginative mass murderer who had spent his life manning the regime's dungeons. A sullen citizenry battered by a mismanaged pandemic watched all this with considerable angst. Khamenei's attempt to cement his legacy began to undo his republic.

The challenge for the clerical oligarchs was to dispatch a conscript army to shantytowns that were culturally familiar to them. The fearsome Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, or IRGC, may be manned by an indoctrinated class of officers, but Iranian foot soldiers are still largely drawn from the pool of draftees. The average conscript may relish beating up pampered university students but would have a tough time turning on his own. The regime enforcers understood this and developed a clever containment strategy. A quick show of violence would be followed by disabling social media and thereby cutting off the demonstrations from one another. They would then wait for the protests to peter out. The immediate demonstrations were eventually quelled—but the cause of discontent lingered.

In the summer of 2022, an unusually divisive spirit seemed to descend on Iran, and the state and society moved in completely different directions. The mullahs were preoccupied with their nuclear gamesmanship, economic tinkering, and the reimposition of severe religious strictures. In the meantime, ordinary Iranians were protesting: Teachers protested about their pay, retirees about their benefits, farmers about lack of water, and women about their mandatory attire in stifling heat. As in 1978, economic anxiety, social
envy, and political disenfranchisement became a powerful force directed against the regime. The Islamic Republic had done it to itself. All channels for political expression were blocked by a corrupt and arrogant ruling elite that was demanding discipline and sacrifice.

And then came the spark. On September 16, a 22-year-old Iranian woman named Mahsa Amini, who had been arrested by the morality police for wearing her hijab improperly, died in custody. Her senseless killing symbolized the cruelty of clerical rule. Cities, provinces, and towns were suddenly engulfed in protests. The chants of “Mullahs get lost” and “We don’t want your Islamic Republic” echoed throughout the country. The old playbook for containing the demonstrations did not seem to work, as the conscripts were asked to shoot women. They hesitated; the demonstrations persisted. Iran’s chief justice, Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Ejei, is reported to have complained that the security forces are “tired and broken, with very low morale.” A semblance of normalcy may yet return to the country, but Iranians of all classes and genders have lost their sense of fear.

The events of this summer seem eerily similar to those of 1978. Mahsa Amini’s murder provoked a sense of national outrage like the terrorist bombing of Rex Cinema. As with the monarchy, the regime has lost its narrative and its bearings. Ali Khamenei has said, “I openly state that the recent riots and unrest in Iran were schemes designed by the U.S., the Zionist regime, their mercenaries, and some treasonous Iranians abroad who helped them.” The shah thought and said the same things and dispatched his diplomats to ask the Carter administration why the CIA was plotting against him. In an ominous sign for the regime in September 2022, the nation’s oil workers issued a statement: “We support the people’s struggles against organized and everyday violence against women and against the poverty and hell that dominate the society.” A young revolutionary at the time of the last Iranian revolution, Khamenei surely recalls that it was strikes that crippled the monarchy and hastened its collapse.

Today, the regime seems to be taking comfort in the fact that at this point there is no charismatic personality or a political party leading the opposition. A revolution, after all, needs revolutionaries. And the mullahs are still in command of an array of security organs. But these are thin reeds. The longer the protests linger, the more they are likely to generate leaders who will take charge of the movement. In the meantime, every day, the mullahs will ask their taxed military to kill poor people and unarmed women. If the regime has only the army as its mainstay of support, then it has little in the way of national strength. The shah had a well-armed military and a seemingly all-knowing secret service, SAVAK, but their combined might could not contain a movement seeking change. The records of the Pahlavi monarchy published by the Islamic Republic reveals that the shah’s generals were most alarmed about the cohesion of their conscript army dispatched to the streets to quell peaceful demonstrations. It is entirely possible that similar conversations are taking place today in the regime’s corridors of power.

The Islamists have made nearly all the same mistakes as the monarch they overthrew. The regime lacks an appealing ideology and shields itself in rhetoric that convinces no one. It is led by a corrupt and out-of-touch elite that relies on conspiracy theories to justify its conduct. It has pursued a foreign policy whose costs are more apparent than its benefits. And the mullahs have forgotten the most essential lesson of their revolutionary triumph: Persian armies don’t like killing their people en masse.

The new Iranian revolution has begun, we just don’t know it yet.
The Demise of Jewish Studies in America—and the Rise of Jewish Studies in Israel

A report from the field, at home and abroad

By Joshua M. Karlip

I study Jewish communities that have died. Most of my academic career has been devoted to the East European Jewish civilization murdered by Hitler and Stalin. Born in America fewer than 30 years after the Holocaust, I grew up surrounded by those who had come from it and those who had survived the genocidal spree. During my childhood, in the 1970s, the familiar accent of nearly all seniors I knew was Yiddish. When I began studying at the Beth Tfiloh Community Day School (now Beth Tfiloh Da-han Community School) in Baltimore, my first Judaic teachers were Holocaust survivors whose accents, personal stories, and ideologies transported me to the destroyed civilization that had shaped them and, by extension, was shaping me. My second-grade teacher, Nechama Spector, had grown up in Rovno, Poland (now Rivne, Ukraine) and had studied at Vilna’s Tarbut Hebrew Teachers Seminary. She taught us the classic song about the death of the Zionist hero Yosef Trumpeldor:

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Commentary
In the Galilee, in Tel Chai, Trumpeldor fell,
On behalf of his nation, on behalf of his land
The hero Yosef fell...

From this secure base, I set out on a journey of historical recovery. I learned Yiddish in the nick of time from some of its last native speakers from prewar Lithuania and Poland, aware that I was being gifted with knowledge from people who had come from a world that was no more. Alas, as early adulthood gave way to middle age, I discovered that not only had the remnants of the East European Jewish legacy that had once surrounded me vanished, but the majority of American Jewish scholars my age and younger no longer felt motivated by the arc of history that had given me purpose—the fact that national and religious destruction had been followed by an astonishing rebirth.

I have written about and studied the religious and national distinctiveness of East European Jewry in its various incarnations: from Diaspora nationalism and Yiddishism in my first book to rabbinic (counter) culture in the Soviet Union in my current research. Now, however, most Jewish-studies scholars in America are downplaying Jewish distinctiveness in their primary concern with acculturation—the adaptation to and adoption of the majority culture, in which they view Jews more as Russians and Poles and less as Jews.

In December 2020, I participated in a Zoom panel at the annual Association for Jewish Studies Conference that discussed the state of the field of Jewish historiography over the past two decades. One participant noted that the first two decades of the 21st century have witnessed a rise in studies of the history of anti-Jewish violence. In response, I offered what I considered an innocuous explanation. Over the past two decades, I suggested, Jews have experienced an alarming rise in violent attacks. Between 2000 and 2005, the second intifada targeted the Jewish civilian population of Israel, leaving nearly 1,000 dead. Here in America, we have witnessed synagogue shootings in Pittsburgh and Poway, as well as a steady stream of attacks, some deadly, on Jews who “look” like Jews—Orthodox men.

This explanation did not sit well with a senior scholar in the audience. “What you said was exceedingly Jewishly focused,” she lectured me. She then went on to “enlighten” me that those who attack Jews are not primarily targeting Jews. Rather, the true targets of their hatred are African Americans. These hatemongers simply are angry at American Jews for promoting African-American rights. She ended her disquisition with a challenge. If I were really serious about fighting anti-Semitism, she told me, I would openly ally myself with Black Lives Matter.

Try to explain to those attacked, beaten, and maimed that the attack was not directed at them, as Jews! Could it be that an award-winning historian resorted to this nonsensical argument because my position had struck a nerve? Earlier on in the conference, I had questioned whether the trend of focusing on Russified and Polonized Jews was leading to a general misrepresentation of the overall East European Jewish experience. In the czarist census of 1897, 97 percent of the 5 million Jews of Russia said Yiddish was their mother tongue. Similarly, during World War I, several informed observers estimated that religious traditionalists constituted 75 to 80 percent of Polish Jewry. And yet the most fashionable topic in my field is those who sought to assimilate or acculturate. While the stories of Russified, Polonized, and secularized East European Jews should be told, of course, these narratives should not lead us to neglect or forget about the 97 percent of Yiddish speakers, or about the overwhelming traditionalist (a.k.a. Orthodox) majority. We need to understand our subjects in their own thickly Jewish terms rather than remake them in our own acculturated image. In the American academy, Jewish studies has come to reflect the contemporary American Jewish reality of high intermarriage rates and overwhelming illiteracy in Hebrew and classical Jewish sources.

American Jewish studies, like American Jewry itself, is fast becoming de-Judaized.

This process of de-Judaization has only accelerated in the past two years. In April 2021, Noam Pianko, the president of the Association for Jewish Studies, based in New York, was forced to resign by his board. His sin: attending a Zoom meeting of scholars that included a sociologist of American Jewry named Steven Cohen who stood accused by young women scholars of sexual harassment. His sin: attending a Zoom meeting of scholars that included a sociologist of American Jewry named Steven Cohen who stood accused by young women scholars of sexual harassment. This is second-degree guilt by association. As Ruth Wisse has argued, the members of AJS’s Women Caucus who...
forced Pianko’s resignation had long since reviled Cohen for his advocacy of Jewish inmarriage and parenthood as the best tools to perpetuate American Jewish survival. This view, according to Cohen’s critics, served a larger capitalist and patriarchal agenda that aimed at controlling the romantic choices and reproduction of Jewish women.

Just when I thought that the situation couldn’t get worse, it did. In late May 2021, more than 220 Jewish studies and Israel studies professors signed a “Statement on Israel/Palestine.” The statement reads more like a Palestinian manifesto than a qualified scholarly assessment. Historians are supposed to choose how they frame events very carefully, which is why I found the opening sentence of the statement particularly horrifying: “As scholars of Jewish Studies and Israel Studies based in various universities, departments, and disciplines, we condemn the state violence that the Israeli government and its security forces have been carrying out in Gaza; their evictions of Palestinian residents of Sheikh Jarrah and other neighborhoods of East Jerusalem; and their suppression of civilian protests in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Jewish-Arab cities, and Palestinian towns and villages in Israel.”

Having squarely blamed Israel for the fighting, these scholars then went on to reserve the majority of their empathy for the Palestinians: “We share and hold the pain of Gazans, who have lost and are losing family members, homes, property, businesses, cultural institutions, medical facilities, and civilian infrastructure to Israeli bombings and of Palestinians in the West Bank who have lost loved ones in shootings by security forces.” Only afterward, and half-heartedly, did they “affirm the pain, fear, and anger of Israeli Jews and Palestinian citizens of Israel who have lost loved ones and homes to unjustifiable and indiscriminate Hamas rockets.”

The entire Zionist experiment and the State of Israel, these scholars insisted, were rooted in a “settler colonial paradigm” that had given rise to “unjust, enduring, and unsustainable systems of Jewish supremacy, ethnocratic segregation, discrimination, and violence against Palestinians.” Although they made a nod to the diversity and robustness of Israeli Jewish culture, the authors of the statement concluded that the enterprise of a Jewish state itself was illegitimate: “Israeli culture, society, and politics, moreover, continue to unfold on land whose majority Palestinian population the state displaced, whose lands it confisc-
day for the return to Zion rather than the acculturated elites who sought home in Russia, Poland, Germany, and France.

What a shame that these colleagues had never met Mrs. Spector, my childhood teacher. Knowing a woman who had learned to speak fluent Hebrew in Poland, where she considered only the land of Israel her native home, might have unsettled their adopted narrative of the Jews as colonial usurpers. Having learned from such people means that I take the words of S.Y. Agnon's 1966 Nobel Prize acceptance speech as the lived experience of millions of Jews, only a few whom survived to see the creation of the State of Israel:

As a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem, and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of the exile. But I always regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem.

Without that consciousness of our own nativeness in the Holy Land, the national culture, language, and civil society of Israel would not exist today.

The sessions that I attended at the World Congress demonstrated how scholars can be at once, to quote the senior scholar from my AJS panel, "exceedingly Jewishly focused" and exceedingly academically rigorous. From the outset, it was clear that Jewish studies in Israel is a national endeavor. On the first evening, the president of Israel, Isaac Herzog, addressed the attendees. He spoke about the connection between rigorous academic Jewish studies and Jewish identity from the founding of our field in 19th-century Germany to its flowering in Israel today. Professor Moshe Idel, a distinguished scholar of Jewish mysticism and the current president of the World Congress, talked about the expansion of Jewish studies in Israel to include once-neglected fields such as mysticism, folklore, and Diaspora Jewish languages. For Israeli scholars such as Idel, Jewish studies is the living legacy of their national community. An excursion of our YU group to the Israel Museum solidified this realization. In all its displays, the Israel Museum curated Jewish ritual objects such as menorot and parokhah (Torah ark covers) to emphasize the shared religious heritage of the Jewish nation in the Diaspora. Walking through the museum's preserved remains of synagogues, ranging from early modern Surinam to 19th-century Germany, I realized that the Israel Museum tells the story of those Jews who in every generation and every geographical locale had struggled to preserve their Jewish distinctiveness and transmit it to the next generation. And I had an epiphany: Ultimately, this is the story of the entire State of Israel and its Jewish national community in all of its variety and complexity. The rigorous academic study of that distinctiveness in all its specific forms and incarnations serves as the mission of Jewish studies as it should be practiced everywhere, and as it is most often practiced in Israel.

I struggled with the question of what and who constituted my academic community now that so many of my colleagues had joined in the war against Israel. I was grateful to Jarrod Tanny, associate professor of Jewish history at the University of North Carolina, for founding the Jewish Studies Zionist Network, and I gladly signed its statement pushing back against the demonization of Israel among American Jewish-studies scholars, swimming against the prevalent stream in the field. In that context, my friend and colleague Steven Fine, director of the Yeshiva University Center for Israel Studies, suggested we send a contingent of YU doctoral students to attend the World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem. Since the 1950s, the World Congress of Jewish Studies has held an international conference every four years on the campus of Hebrew University. By sponsoring our doctoral students to attend the World Congress, we could demonstrate our support for Israel and identify ourselves with the Judaic-centered vision of Jewish studies that, not surprisingly, thrives in Israel.

Without the consciousness of our own nativeness in the Holy Land, the national culture, language, and civil society of Israel would not exist today.
Standing under the wooden ceiling of a reconstructed Bavarian synagogue, I realized that I had found my academic community among my Israeli peers and colleagues. They share in my mission of exploring the thick Jewish identities, textual and oral, of previous Jewish generations. It is these identities that have merged into the organic whole that is Jewish identity in Israel today.

A century ago, one of the reigning Zionist paradigms was shelilat ha-golah, the negation of the Diaspora. The new Jewish identity would emerge, it was argued, only through the nullification of the old. Today, however, Israeli Jewish identity has emerged not as the negation but rather as the apotheosis of Diaspora Jewry in all of its variety.

Having spent years studying the Jews of Vilna, dubbed “the Jerusalem of Lithuania,” I feel its spirit living on in the hundreds of yeshivot and synagogues of present-day Jerusalem. Its spirit also lives on at the National Library of Israel, currently located on the Givat Ram campus of Hebrew University, soon to be relocated to a larger building nearby. The 1986 documentary Partisans of Vilna begins with a scene of Abba Kovner, the great Hebrew poet and former partisan, standing over a model of the shul hoyf, the synagogue courtyard, in Vilna that he had designed for Tel Aviv’s Diaspora Museum (now renamed the Museum of the Jewish People). In describing the various synagogues and study houses of the shul hoyf, Kovner paused when speaking about the Strashun Library, which had been created from the vast personal collection of the 19th-century Vilna scholar Matisyahu Strashun. Here, “perhaps for the last time,” mused Kovner wistfully, old and young, religious and secular, sat side by side, united by their joint passion for Jewish study.

Happily, Kovner has been proven wrong. One can find this ecumenical spirit living on...in the National Library of Israel. One walks into the manuscript and archive room to find young secular Israelis sitting side by side with an elderly rabbi in a wheelchair. Increasingly, Haredim also make regular use of it. A warm and collegial atmosphere pervades the library, which extends beyond the scholars and librarians to the other staff as well. After several days at the library, I found myself on a first-name basis with the guards no less than with the librarians. Very often, it is the Jewish textual tradition that serves as the bridge between the visiting scholars and this library staff. I asked one of the guards if he would mind keeping an eye on my computer for several minutes. With a twinkle in his eye, he retorted, “Mah atah oshev, sh’ani shomer inam?” “What do you think? That I am a free guard?” This was a textual quip based on the Mishnah in Bava Metziah, which differentiates between a paid and unpaid guard. It was an “only in Israel” moment, in which an average Israeli citizen related his job to a Talmudic debate.

Another Vilna native, the Yiddishist Max Weinreich, famously referred to Yiddish as di shprakh fun derekh hashas, the language of the way of the Talmud. Weinreich, who earlier in his career had espoused the secular origins of the Yiddish language, did an about-face after the Holocaust. The distinctiveness of Yiddish, he asserted, came from its origins in the besmedresh, the Study House, and its Talmudic discourse. Today, di shprakh fun derekh hashas is no longer Yiddish but rather modern Hebrew, which has naturally absorbed the biblical and Talmudic layers of language and knowledge that have allowed every Jewish civilization from Poland to Yemen to remain distinct.

After the conference, I left my national home, Israel, for my academic home, Yeshiva University, proud to be conversant in both the classic and contemporary shprakh fun derekh hashas and even prouder to be part of an academic community that studies the Jewish past and present in that language and from that perspective of distinctiveness.
How Ken Burns Misuses the Holocaust

A new documentary uses the Shoah to score present-day political points

By Jonathan S. Tobin

KEN BURNS’S documentaries blend striking visuals of still photos or archival film with colorful and often insightful analysis and narration. But his skill as a filmmaker is not the sole cause of his unprecedented five-decade run of 35 documentaries and documentary series on PBS, dating back to 1981’s Brooklyn Bridge. He has remained the most important nonfiction filmmaker in America because of the way he and his colleagues use the historical subjects they explore to make points about contemporary political and social issues—points that usually reinforce the preexisting biases of Burns’s liberal viewing audience.

The brilliance of Burns’s sublime Civil War, from 1990, is rooted in the way he weaves dramatic accounts of the battles and the conflict’s colorful personalities into a compelling narrative about racism, slavery, and the struggle for civil rights that would follow its conclusion. At the time, the Burns perspective on the Civil War was a refreshing and vital break from more traditional histories that had mostly hewed to a war-between-brothers approach—a way of portraying the war that largely avoided the enduring effect of slavery on American society. The same can be said of his Baseball (1994), an 18-and-a-half-hour marathon that primarily emphasized race, highlighting the Negro Leagues and Jackie Robinson’s breaking of the color barrier in 1947. Baseball is a great series, but it does at times have the quality, as George Weigel put it in Commentary upon the show’s release, of “a 7th-grade social-studies book from a progressive publisher, with lavish illustrations and a very politically correct text.”

That is also an apt description of Burns’s latest effort, The U.S. and the Holocaust, which aired on PBS in September. While Burns does a more than adequate...
As a result of the provisions in the Johnson-Reed legislation, any efforts to provide a haven in America for those fleeing Adolf Hitler’s Europe were largely futile.

That the need for a place to escape from Europe became necessary only a decade after America had undergone a radical shift in its approach to immigration was a terrible irony. Anti-immigrant sentiment had led to the passage of the 1924 Johnson-Reed Immigration Act, which imposed restrictions and strict quotas on migrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. Until the 1920s, the United States had what might now be termed an open-borders policy, with the only real restrictions levied against those who arrived suffering serious illness. Though rules about preventing the entry of those who were not able to support themselves, and therefore likely to be a “public charge,” dated back to the 1880s, they were not major factors in deterring newcomers during the era of mass immigration in the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

As a result of the Johnson-Reed legislation, efforts to provide a haven in America for those fleeing Adolf Hitler’s Europe were largely futile. The legislation was also administered by the State Department in such a way as to ensure that even fewer than the small number who might have been legally admitted to the United States were allowed to come. That those limitations were imposed in the context of a political environment in which nativist sentiments, eugenics, racism, and anti-Semitism were broadly popular is also undeniable. Indeed, as far as the Nazis were concerned, this proved that America didn’t want Europe’s Jews any more than Germany did.

The image of the United States in Lazarus’s poem, as a golden door open to welcome Europe’s “homeless, tempest-tost” refugees, is part of the country’s identity. That especially rings true for an American Jewish community that, then and now, was largely descended from those who entered the country from Central and Eastern Europe during the period of open borders. But even if Johnson-Reed is one of the root causes of America’s moral failing in the Holocaust, to put it down, as Burns does, to being solely the function of nativism and anti-Semitism doesn’t provide a full explanation.

The debate about immigration was also influenced by economics. By the 1920s, the United States was no longer a largely empty continent in desperate need of cheap, immigrant labor and settlers, as it had...
The U.S. and the Holocaust’s analogy between today’s immigration debate and the tragic denial of aid to the Jews in the 1930s and ’40s is offensive.

been in the 19th century. Moreover, after the Great Depression hit in 1929 and unemployment reached historic levels, a return to open borders or even a significant liberalization of the law would have been impossible even if nativist sentiment and racism were not factors.

The implicit analogy between today’s immigration debate and the tragic denial of aid to the Jews in the 1930s and ’40s is offensive. In Roosevelt’s time, there was no threat that there would be a surge of millions of illegal immigrants crossing into the United States, as has been the case in the past two years, with the Biden administration essentially halting much of the nation’s enforcement mechanisms at the southern border. Advocates for liberal immigration policies or amnesty for a population of migrants that may well now number over 20 million sometimes speak as if every Central or Southern American seeking to come to the United States is fleeing for his life like the Jews of Europe were. That is just not true. Today’s immigrants and asylum seekers are overwhelmingly economic migrants rather than people escaping political or religious persecution. One can be entirely sympathetic to their plight and believe they would be a net bonus to the United States if they were allowed in and still see a world of difference between people looking to improve their lot in life and people who were on the verge of, or in the middle of, a genocide. We properly castigate those who closed America’s gates during the 1930s and later, while the Nazi killing machine was in full operation, because every Jew who was denied entry was facing a death sentence in Europe. That is not the case with migrants from Central and South America today.

The increasingly desperate efforts of Jews to get out of Europe is a story that The U.S. and the Holocaust tells very well. As with all Burns films, there is a mix of personal anecdote and broad historical context. He and his collaborators, Lynn Novick and Sarah Botstein, provide us with touching stories of survivors, including a few of the lucky ones who managed to make it to America—and the loved ones left behind and lost to the barbarism of the Germans and their allies. Familiar victims, such as Anne Frank and her family, are given attention, but the stories of those who are not, in Dara Horn’s clever formulation, “everyone’s second favorite Jew” and therefore mostly lost to history are also included.

What Burns omits is more telling. His 2014 production, The Roosevelts: An Intimate History, included at least some criticism of FDR’s inaction when it came to the Holocaust. But this film—a film about the Holocaust—consistently defends him. The story told here is one in which the president, a man who had largely unchallenged political power as he bestrode the American scene, wanted to do more but was prevented from doing so. In this telling, it is a nativist Congress, Jewish haters at the State Department, the general acceptance of anti-Semitism, as well as the exigencies of fighting the war and the impossibility of effective action or rescue that stopped this well-meaning president from saving more Jews.

A proper understanding of FDR and the Holocaust is elusive for many pundits and historians who cannot get beyond the impulse to depict him as either an unblemished hero or the darkest of villains. Roosevelt clearly understood that Hitler was a threat and, as far as he was able, consistently maneuvered the United States closer to a position where it might aid Germany’s foes and eventually get into and lead the fight to defeat it. His masterful war leadership, including his decision to make the defeat of Germany a higher priority than that of Japan at a time when most Americans would have made a different choice, must be an important element of any conversation. Yet while FDR may have, at least in principle, sympathized with the plight of the Jews who were the primary object of Nazi persecution, actions that might have led to more of them being saved were neither a priority nor a subject of even minimal concern for him.

Part of this, as Burns’s film is at pains to explain, is understandable. The idea that American foreign policy in the 1930s should have been driven by an effort to help Jews was considered a non-starter even by many who were not anti-Semitic. American business interests and a broad political consensus that opposed any idea of involvement in another European war ensured that the United States would not do much about Nazi Germany in its first years in power, even as FDR and others condemned the persecution of the Jews.

Pearl Harbor didn’t alter that calculation. Opposition to more liberal immigration laws and, once the war began, suspicion of refugees as possible spies and fifth columnists were formidable obstacles to increas-
The attempt by Ken Burns and sympathetic historians to blame Charles Lindbergh for FDR’s reluctance to do much about the Jews is misleading.

Ironically, the film’s spotlight on some of the true American heroes of this tragedy—such as the diplomats Varian Fry and Hiram Bingham IV, both of whom worked tirelessly and against the orders of the State Department to help Jews escape Vichy France—only draws more attention to the question of what the United States could have done had it become official government policy to aid those millions marked for death by the Nazis.

The War Refugee Board—the government’s one real effort to help save Jews—proves the same point. It was, as the documentary suggests, a bright spot in an otherwise unimpressive series of American actions during this era. But it also demonstrates American moral bankruptcy and FDR’s failure. The Board was created in 1944 as the result of a successful public campaign from dissident Jews such as Zionist activist Hillel Kook (known then as Peter Bergson) and Hollywood screenwriter, playwright, and journalist Ben Hecht. They were treated as troublemakers by the organized Jewish community and by influential Jews such as Rabbi Stephen Wise, a formerly great Zionist leader who stained his legacy by refusing to use his influence with the president to persuade him to take the issue of rescue seriously. But because it works against the narrative that FDR was helpless to do anything, this chapter of the story—which also revolves around the conflict within the Jewish community that has largely provided the template for American Jewish activism ever since—gets less attention in the film than it deserves.

Though it had the enthusiastic support of Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, the Board was underfunded and given little backing by other governmental authorities, such as the State Department and the military, whose cooperation would have been necessary for more extensive operations. But as the documentary demonstrates, it still managed to save (at the very least) tens of thousands of Jews in Hungary in 1944 thanks to its employment of Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg. As the series points out, most of the victims of the Holocaust were killed in the earlier stages of the war and could not have been saved by Allied action. But there is little doubt that if the War Refugee Board had been put in place much earlier and given more money and assistance, it might have,
The U.S. and the Holocaust sees the subject as primarily an opportunity to promote universalist messages against prejudice rather than a lesson about Jewish powerlessness.

at a minimum, helped prevent such acts as the closing off of escape roots by both the Axis and Allies (the British were more concerned about keeping Jews out of Palestine than in saving any of them) and rescued significantly more people.

The documentary also gives relatively little time to the question of whether or not the United States should have bombed the rail lines to Auschwitz or the death factory itself, as many in the Jewish community urged. Here again, the response of the filmmaker is a figurative shrug of the shoulders. FDR and his administration are portrayed as dealing with an impossible dilemma, and therefore they shouldn’t be judged too harshly.

Leaving aside moral arguments about whether the bombings would have hurt many victims (a factor that was never considered in regard to the bombing of any other targets), it’s wrong to dismiss this issue and the entire idea of rescue as a mere matter of hindsight instead of a realistic option.

When you consider how much effort the United States and the Allies put into far less important issues, such as saving masterpieces of art stolen by the Nazis, the equation looks very different. The same can be said of the enormous resources poured into helping resistance forces. With the notable exceptions of Yugoslavia (where Tito’s resistance army tied down an Axis army) and those French who directly aided the Normandy landings, the resistance did little or nothing to aid Allied victory.

The bombing of Auschwitz didn’t happen for the same reason that the Roosevelt administration declined to work around the immigration laws to save Jews: The United States government and the man at its head weren’t particularly interested in the subject. That Burns won’t confront this fact directly is a major flaw.

LIKE ALL BURNS documentaries, The U.S. and the Holocaust is a beautifully crafted piece of filmmaking that, its glaring failures of theme notwithstanding, makes for riveting television. It also provides an introduction to the basics of the Holocaust and the history of American anti-Semitism to those
who know little about these subjects.

Yet contrary to the film’s conclusion, the Holocaust tells us little or nothing about what to do about America’s contemporary immigration debates or the current American problem with Jew-hatred. Any attempt to frame the Holocaust as a representative moment in the history of human intolerance is a moral calamity. Burns demonstrated this in a CNN interview to promote the film. He spoke of Florida Governor Ron DeSantis’s decision to ship illegal immigrants to Martha’s Vineyard—whose affluent liberal residents advocate open borders but prefer to have border communities deal with the humanitarian crisis this has engendered—as if it deserved to be mentioned in the same conversation as the subject of his documentary.

That Burns, a longtime supporter of the Democrats and liberal causes, would be guilty of playing along with such an inappropriate Holocaust analogy demonstrates that the filmmaker’s efforts to frame the question of American guilt in this context should be viewed with suspicion. The same is true of his attempt to claim that current political opponents of open borders—such as Trump, DeSantis, and their supporters—are figures who conjure up the threats that America and the Jews faced in the past.

Anti-Semitism isn’t merely a collection of hateful sentiments; it’s a political organizing principle that has attached itself to a variety of different ideologies, from Nazism to Communism to Islamism. The answer to such threats isn’t open borders for America, amnesty for illegal immigrants, or even ensuring that more people read The Diary of Anne Frank. The only way to deter another genocide of the Jews is Jewish empowerment and our ability to defend ourselves, something we would gain only after the war with the creation of the State of Israel.

Some who attempt to use the Holocaust as an exhibit in contemporary immigration-law debates are actually indifferent to the security of Israel and, indeed, support appeasement of an Iran that seeks nuclear weapons to possibly perpetrate another Holocaust. This makes it hard to take them seriously when they lecture Americans about the murder of 6 million Jews in the past century.

The Holocaust was a chapter of history marked by American failure. But whatever one may think about Franklin Roosevelt and his indifference to Hitler’s victims, the responsibility for the murder of 6 million Jews still belongs to the Nazis and their collaborators. It was a crime the United States may not have had the power to deter, but one this nation could have done more to stop had its political leadership been willing to do so. This is a disturbing fact for many who lionize Roosevelt. But Burns and others who clearly wish to apply the lessons from this failure to complicated 21st-century political debates, while ignoring real-time genocides or potent threats to the security of millions of living Jews, shouldn’t pretend they have learned anything from the past or have anything to teach us about it.
Among those who closely follow American politics, we often hear about “the return of foreign policy.” This supposes that Americans don’t usually think much about global affairs except during occasional, often sudden, crises. It’s a characterization that’s now truer than ever. These days, domestic politics are infused with the kind of life-or-death bipolarity reminiscent of how we once thought about the Cold War or the fight against Nazi Germany. Never mind existential challenges from overseas; the threat to our democracy, we’re told, comes from within. And there’s more talk of civil war than of a potential military challenge from a foreign adversary.

Even when foreign crises do emerge, they’re often shrunk down and wedged into our intramural political squabbles. The new right, for example, paints supporters of Ukraine as dupes for the establishment, and the left’s Squad claims Iran’s female protestors as allies against pro-life Americans.

Unfortunately, while our attention is focused on internal politics, the 21st century is turning dark. An increasingly unpredictable Vladimir Putin threatens nuclear war in ways that cannot be dismissed as bluster. And a hostile China has expanded its reach into every corner of the globe—including our own—without even using its new advanced weaponry. This is to say nothing of the threats at our southern border, North Korea’s nuclear bluster, and a triumphant Taliban.

Worst of all, the U.S. has facilitated the forward march of our enemies by deliberately retracting American power abroad, stripping down our military, backing away from necessary fights, betraying our allies, and cutting bad deals with bad actors. China has risen on the back of stolen American technology and achieved frictionless infiltration of American markets. President Biden signaled irresolution to Putin in 2021 by easing sanctions on Putin’s Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline and by his calamitous withdrawal of U.S. forces in Afghanistan.

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During it all, Arkansas Senator Tom Cotton has been a prescient voice warning against the dangers of American weakness. He wrote his new book, *Only the Strong*, to answer the questions “How did we get to this point?” and “Why doesn’t America win anymore?” We know right away that this is no typical politician’s book, as it eschews what Americans want to talk about—domestic politics—and takes on instead what we must face—U.S. defense in a dangerous new world. This not to say that Cotton’s book isn’t political. It is deeply so, and in the best sense: It deals with political ideas. Cotton, who served in both Iraq and Afghanistan, traces our current predicament to its roots in liberal foreign-policy thinking and argues that we must reclaim the Founders’ understanding of freedom and defense if we are to protect our way of life.

Cotton breaks down liberal foreign policy into its constituent parts. At its base is a distrust of America’s founding ideals. Where as the Founders believed that our God-given rights demanded protection against our own fallible nature, progressives have always had faith in man’s perfectibility and believed that expert administration would ultimately make such vigilance unnecessary. This goes back to Woodrow Wilson, who said, “All that progressives ask or desire is the permission—in an era when ‘development,’ ‘evolution,’ is the scientific word—to interpret the Constitution according to the Darwinian principle.” When applied to foreign affairs, this means, as Cotton puts it, that “the Progressives, imagining themselves more enlightened by the march of History, pursued a utopian foreign policy, dedicated to unachievable abstractions and detached from America’s national interests.” When the U.S. entered World War I, for example, Wilson claimed that “we have no selfish ends to serve,” and indeed he sought “only the vindication of right, of human right.”

Progressives’ pursuit of universal abstractions and their hesitancy toward American interests has manifested in two contradictory modes: utopian internationalism and anti-American isolationism. Throughout our history, liberal leaders have weakened America’s hand by acting on one or the other of these impulses. And they’ve further mangled the works by resorting to ineffective half measures in the hopes of pleasing everyone. Thus, we have the recipe for liberal foreign policy.

Cotton offers a compendium of progressive foreign-policy blunders, which makes for engaging, if infuriating, reading. To take a few in chronological order: There’s the Bay of Pigs fiasco, in which John F. Kennedy made the late decision to dramatically cut back American air support for anti-Castro forces, ensuring their defeat and our humiliation. There are Kennedy’s and Lyndon Johnson’s missteps in Vietnam. In 1963, JFK permitted the coup against South Vietnam’s pro-American and anti-Communist president Ngo Dinh Diem, which meant “we had assumed responsibility for the fight against advancing Communists.” Once in that fight, Kennedy resorted to half measures that failed to put down the North Vietnamese. Then President Johnson, guided by Wilsonian administrator par excellence Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, shied away from decisive action in hopes of “communicating” with the enemy. In the 1970s, Jimmy Carter authored many great innovations in foreign-policy malfeasance. Among these, Cotton plucks out Carter’s handling of the Panama Canal as an example of “the progressive theory of treaties.” In 1978, Carter surrendered both the canal that we built and our sovereignty over the Canal Zone, an important strategic asset. In return, we were assured that the canal would be open to American ships. “But of course,” Cotton notes, “we already had these rights.”

On a far smaller scale than Vietnam, Bill Clinton’s disastrous Somalia operation in 1993 bears the hallmarks of Democratic faintheartedness. Clinton sent 450 American Special Forces to capture Somali warlord Farah Aydid and destroy his command structure. Aydid’s forces had recently killed four Americans and injured seven others. But the size of the American deployment was clearly too small for the job. As Cotton writes: “Our commander responsible for Somalia gave the operation only a 25 percent chance of capturing Aydid. But Clinton went ahead anyway.” It all went south when a U.S. Black Hawk helicopter was shot down and the operation unraveled. Eighteen American warriors were killed in the resulting melee, and images of their bodies being dragged through Mogadishu were broadcast the world over.

On it goes. In this century, Barack Obama exemplified the progressive who thinks of American interests as a form of bad manners. In his early apology tour, Obama expressed his regret over past U.S. action in the Middle East, Latin America, and beyond. Cotton also holds him up as a practitioner of foreign-policy utopianism. Obama entered the U.S. into the JCPOA agreement with Iran, which put the mullahs on a glide path to nuclear weapons and gave the regime some $100 billion to boot. And when Syrians rose up against Iranian (and Russian) ally Bashar al-Assad, Obama even played the isolationist. He refrained from helping Syrians

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topple the anti-American dictator lest it upset his Iran diplomacy.

And then, of course, there's Joe Biden. Whatever one thinks of the Biden administration's handling of the war of in Ukraine, Cotton's book valuably catalogs the president's consequential failings in the run-up to Putin's attack. He extended the New START Treaty, which “allowed Russia to expand its strategic nuclear arsenal and ignored Russia's large advantage in tactical nuclear weapons” He waived Trump-administration sanctions on Nord Stream 2. In April 2021, when Putin first sent tens of thousands of soldiers and equipment to Ukraine's border, Biden met with the strongman for a summit in Geneva. The occasion raised Putin's stature, and he did temporarily pull back his troops. But that was before our catastrophic withdrawal from Afghanistan. Cotton writes that “Putin saw a feebble American president outmatched by events” in Afghanistan.

“Just weeks after America's humiliation in Kabul, Russian troops returned to Ukraine's border under the cover of unusually large annual military exercises—and never left.” Even then, the Biden administration killed a tough bipartisan sanctions proposal aimed at stopping Putin while there was still time.

Cotton's analysis of past mistakes will serve history well, but he also has worthwhile recommendations for what we must do next. His ideas are mostly commonsensical, which seems to be the point. In other words, let's stop going out of our way to make things worse. He wants a defense budget of at least 4 percent of the economy, with annual growth of 3 to 5 percent over inflation. Cotton also proposes a border wall of some sort and a mandatory E-Verify program to keep employees from hiring illegals. Ending the war on fossil fuels and nuclear energy, he notes, will help move us toward energy independence and make us less reliant on untrustworthy foreign powers. Cotton additionally calls for renewed clarity in distinguishing America's friends (the United Kingdom and Israel) from enemies (Russia, China, and Iran).

But Cotton offers his most bracing counsel on China. His recommendations here are both viable and effective, and they will undoubtedly unnerve those Americans who either fear a conflict with Beijing or are profiting from Chinese meddling. In pushing back on Beijing, he says, “the economy is the primary theater of conflict.” Cotton notes that “our misguided trade policies turned China into the world's 'factory floor' and cost hardworking Americans more than three million manufacturing jobs and sixty thousand factories.” His long list of proposed economic policies includes, but is not limited to, revoking China's most-favored-nation trading status; making Chinese companies follow our rules if they want to participate in our stock exchanges; banning Chinese investment in vital sectors such as farmland and food production; banning Chinese nationals who are linked to the Chinese Communist Party from studying in the U.S.; ending federal support for studios that want to build factories in the U.S. and produce critical items such as semiconductors.

But our contest with China goes beyond economics, and Cotton offers nothing less than a blueprint for fighting a new Cold War. He believes we need to invest in weapons such as new submarines and drones that can be used off China's coast. And Cotton calls for our supplying Taiwan with weapons such as anti-aircraft missiles and sea mines that will help it in an asymmetric war. “Instead of a chicken in every pot,” he writes, “Taiwan needs a Stinger in every attic.” Finally, Cotton believes it's time for the U.S. to retire its long-held policy of strategic ambiguity on Taiwan and “tell Xi in advance that we will come to Taiwan's defense if China attacks—and China will suffer a grievous defeat.”

In his criticisms and recommendations, Cotton is guided above all else by an appreciation of the Founders' aim to “secure the Blessing of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity,” as the Constitution has it. In foreign-affairs terms, this amounts to fighting unapologetically to ensure our security, freedom, and prosperity. There is no room in this fight for isolationism, utopianism, or half measures. Every mechanism of the government they bequeathed us was designed to contend with the manifold dangers of our species. Tom Cotton is only calling upon us to remember that and act accordingly.
Trapped in the Algorithm

The Chaos Machine: The Inside Story of How Social Media Rewired Our Minds and Our World
By Max Fisher
Little, Brown, 350 pages

Reviewed by Noam Blum

In 2003, the philosopher Nick Bostrom proposed a thought experiment on the dangers of artificial intelligence. In his scenario, an AI was tasked with maximizing the number of paper clips in its collection. A superintelligent machine unshackled from human perspectives and ethical frameworks, he argued, would deduce that the best way to maximize its paper-clips collection was to convert all matter in the universe—humans included—into paper clips. The question of how to create the ultimate paper-clips collection would be definitively answered, but at what cost?

In his new book The Chaos Machine: The Inside Story of How Social Media Rewired Our Minds and Our World, the journalist Max Fisher sets out to analyze a similar situation. In his scenario, libertarian-minded Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, in an attempt to maximize online engagement, created esoteric self-evolving algorithms that convert all social-media users into pure incandescent and polarized outrage, and then shrugged at the wreckage they have caused. Fisher’s work could have served as a vital warning sign against this mathematically precise descent into madness, but the book he has written suggests instead that the eponymous Chaos Machine is already so alarmingly efficient that it even managed to coopt Fisher’s thoughts before he set them to paper. Those thoughts prove to resemble those of the supposedly manipulated, blinkered online radical communities he highlights.

The Chaos Machine examines a serious problem that very clearly transcends race, gender, class, and politics through a completely polarized lens. In Fisher’s view, algorithm-driven extremism on the right is an approaching landslide of evil brought on by knowing bad actors and the tacit acceptance of their more mainstream counterparts. But he ignores and downplays any equivalent phenomenon on the left, aside from the occasional sad head shake at how unsuspecting but well meaning people are brainwashed by the white male priests of the Techno-Anarchist Church of Zuckerberg into engaging in “so-called cancel culture.”

It cannot be stressed enough that the crisis Fisher is describing is real and pressing. In their obsessive pursuit of greater engagement, social-media companies (Facebook and YouTube being the primary focus of the book) have designed self-iterating “Deep Learning” algorithms that inexorably funnel users toward increasingly radicalized content, since those algorithms have learned how that kind of material brings about more active engagement.

Fisher describes in detail how algorithm-driven polarization in countries as various as Myanmar, Sri Lanka, India, Germany, Brazil, and the United States fuels xenophobia, conspiracies, and violence—problems that concern the companies reaping the benefits from the increasingly universal usage of social media only once it’s too late to fix what’s broken. Fisher establishes the foundations of the problem—from the dominant traits of Silicon Valley whiz kids, to the evolution of news feeds and engagement features, to the psychological and sociological effects of the rapid transition to ubiquitous online life. But he himself is so trapped in the ideological bubble curated for him by the very Chaos Machine he criticizes that he can identify it as a problem only when it afflicts those who live outside his social biodome.

Take, for instance, Gamergate—a portmanteau referring to an incredibly complex and confusing 2014–15 Internet controversy long since forgotten. Fisher mentions Gamergate more than 60 times, including in the name of a chapter that boldly declares “Everything Is Gamergate.” It was a toxic period of culture-war battles within the gaming community, and he believes it is perhaps the central hotbed of all Internet foulness over the past eight or so years. Fisher’s Gamergate is the primordial ooze that spawned online racist and misogynist harassment, neo-Nazism, Pizzagate, mass-shooting incels, Trump’s election, Qanon, and, ultimately, the insurrection on January 6, 2021.

In the interests of brevity, I won’t relitigate Gamergate here, but Fisher’s description of it and the “experts” he cites come entirely from the version of events fed to him by the Chaos Machine. The algorithms that dominated Fisher’s

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feed at the time presented him with one-sided evidence that it was purely a right-wing harassment campaign against women and minorities. The truth is far more complicated and nuanced, though no less toxic—perhaps even more so, because of the toxicity on the part of the left that he either has no idea about or ignores conveniently.

Gamergate was merely one niche flare-up in the increasing polarization Fisher describes. But it is hard to reconcile the seriousness of his concern with the paucity of his effort to disentangle it from his own political biases. For example, Fisher frequently mentions the clinical psychologist and author Jordan Peterson as being “one of the online alt-right’s most important gateways.” He portrays Peterson’s content as adja-
cent to beliefs about “white genocide and Jewish subjugation,” because some users who watch his videos on YouTube are eventually led by the recommendation algorithm to videos on those evil topics. But if that’s the case, then logic requires one to point out that Peterson isn’t extreme—for otherwise he would be the destination, not the starting point. If every rabbit hole begins at the surface, how can one blame the surface for the depth of the hole?

The writer and researcher Renée Diestra, whose work on the online radicalization of the anti-vaccine movement is heavily featured here, first became aware of the problem because the benign parenting groups she had joined on Facebook eventually led her to anti-vaxxer content. By Fisher’s logic, Facebook groups on sleep training or teething are therefore complicit as ideological gateways to radicalization—even though their connection to more extreme content is forced algorithmically and not as a result of ideological affinity. It was the algorithm that drove them,” admits Fisher in a moment of clarity, explaining in a later section on medical misinformation that “as with political videos, the algorithm used more credible or familiar channels as gateways to direct users toward the worst conspiracies and misinformation.”

The book features considerable shoe-leather reporting and robust scholarly work in the fields of psychology, social sciences, and data analysis. But the studies Fisher cites are almost always framed as windows into right-wing extremism. He discusses one in which researchers presented a false headline to Republicans about 500 migrants from Central America who had been arrested wearing suicide vests. According to the study, many Republican participants said they would share the headline on social media despite thinking it was inaccurate, indicating it was because the story reflected their politics. While it is true that the study itself (and subsequent media write-ups about it) used the question Fisher mentions as a representative example, it was not the only question researchers had posed, and the study was not exclusively conducted on Republicans. The authors observed similar behavior in both ideological camps, stating in their conclusions that “the pattern of sharing intentions we observe here matches the pattern of actual sharing observed in a large-scale analysis of Twitter users, where partisanship was shown to be a much stronger predictor of sharing than veracity.”

Diestra also frequently mentioned the pan-partisan nature of the anti-vaxx community, especially prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, telling PBS in 2018 that “the anti-vaccine movement is actually bipartisan or nonpartisan, depending on how you want to frame it.”

Speaking of vaccines, Fisher widely features anti-vaxx attitudes as an example of a radicalization rabbit hole driven by social media. He
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points to the spread of conspiracies related to the Zika vaccine in Brazil in 2016. What he doesn’t bother to mention is that these conspiracies were not driven by right-wing attitudes but rather over the false claim that pesticides, rather than the Zika virus, were causing an outbreak of microcephaly—a claim echoed on social media by the progressive actor Mark (the Hulk) Ruffalo. Rather than use this example to highlight the pan-partisan nature of online conspiracy theories, Fisher instead points to the case of a Brazilian woman named Gisleangela Oliveira dos Santos who was taken in by anti-Zika vaccine conspiracies related to microcephaly on YouTube and later voted for right-wing Brazilian presidential candidate Jair Bolsonaro.

Now, it is true that some of the extreme examples of right-wing radicalization that Fisher cites don’t currently have equivalently dangerous counterparts on the left. But he specifically mentions that years of neglecting to focus on these radicalizing phenomena helped them breed unmolested. His one-sided focus in The Chaos Machine risks doing just that for his side of the aisle. Members of Congress such as Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert are called “fringe conspiracists” who succeed only by plucking extremist strings online, but there is no mention of congresswomen Rashida Tlaib or Ilhan Omar, who have both shared anti-Semitic blood libels and engaged in racist dog-whistling on social media to the tune of tens of thousands of shares and likes.

Indeed, every time Fisher has an opportunity to be an honest broker about the effect these algorithms have on both sides, he shows himself to be a lost cause. Given a chance to mention the violence surrounding Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020—which was fueled by hyper-polarized social-media content, video snippets of police brutality of varying authenticity and context, and self-interested radical political activists with huge digital pulpits—Fisher instead chooses to insinuate that at least some of the violence was the result of false-flag-style operations by the supposedly right-wing Boogaloo Bois in an attempt to spark bloodshed between authorities and protestors. He zeroes in, for instance, on one incident in May 2020, when a man named Ivan Harrison Hunter fired a rifle into the air, hoping “to spark violence between protestors and police that would escalate into war,” though no one was hurt in the incident.

Given a chance to mention the reams of wrong and deceptive information circulating during Covid, not just by Donald Trump, but also against him, Fisher chooses to repeat the claim that Trump, from the White House podium, said “the virus could be cured by drinking diluted bleach”—a claim that one quick Google search would have shown him is simply not true. Instead of highlighting how the algorithm corrupts us all, Fisher instead highlights how it has already corrupted him. He is just a paper clip in its collection.

Does Psychiatry Work?

Desperate Remedies: Psychiatry’s Turbulent Quest to Cure Mental Illness
By Andrew Scull
Belknap, 504 pages

Reviewed by Bertie Bregman

When I was a young medical student and it came time to pick a specialty, the landscape was alarmingly broad. At one extreme was psychiatry. The noble goal was to alleviate the deepest and most profound kind of human suffering, but it had the downside of being more talk than action. At the other extreme was surgery, which had plenty of action but not enough talk.

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In the end, I split the difference and chose family medicine, a generalist field with plenty of both talk and action. The goal in family medicine is to see the patient and their illness in the full context of their life. And after more than 25 years of practice, I feel entitled to generalize: As good as we are at fixing the body, a lot of what’s broken lies in the mind. In other words, psychiatry matters. And that is why Desperate Remedies, Andrew Scull’s tour-de-force history of psychiatry from the birth of the asylum in the 1830s to today, is an essential book for our times.

Scull, a distinguished historian at the University of California at San Diego who has been studying and writing about mental illness and treatment for more than four decades, begins with the massive institutions of the 19th century that housed thousands, and eventually hundreds of thousands, of American unfortunates with intractable conditions such as tertiary syphilis,
dementia, alcoholism, and schizophrenia. Presided over by doctors known as alienists—men who considered themselves experts in mental illness but who were mostly dismissed by the rest of the medical profession—these “living tombs” grew to immense proportions, with budgets that often came to represent the largest item in state ledgers. They ate up as much as a third of a state’s revenue in some cases.

The carcasses of former insane asylums litter the national landscape. For a great example in New York City, visit Randall’s Island, where enormous brick buildings with caged windows loom over the grass and turf playing fields used by the city’s schools and sports leagues. My kids play soccer, so I’m on Randall’s a lot, and for years I’ve wondered about these buildings. Turns out the largest one is the Manhattan Psychiatric Center, formerly known as the New York City Asylum for the Insane. It once housed 4,400 patients and was the largest such institution in the world. It still has about 200 beds.

To read Scull’s book and be made aware of the neglect and abuse that occurred behind those walls is hard enough, but the juxtaposition of children playing in their shadow and blithely unaware of their dark history makes it harder still.

And so it is with the rest of Desperate Remedies. Scull describes the past in a way that makes us see the present in a new and jaundiced light. He surveys the celebrated doctors and scientists of the asylum age and describes the procedures they performed on their mentally ill patients. They deliberately infected their charges with malaria or induced meningitis by injecting horse serum directly into the spinal canal. They surgically removed healthy teeth, tonsils, stomachs, spleens, cervixes and colons. They induced life-threatening hypoglycemic coma with insulin overdose. They electrocuting people to cause seizures and lobotomized them with ice picks through the eye socket directly into the brain.

Needless to say, consent was not an issue. The unwilling subjects often represented the most vulnerable persons in society—indigent, black, or female (never mind that they were all, by definition, the mentally ill), who had no one to advocate for them and who were in no position to advocate for themselves.

In the later parts of the book, Scull leaves the 19th century behind to discuss two 20th-century developments that revolutionized psychiatry: psychoanalysis and psychopharmacology, or therapy and drugs. In each case, Scull balances intellectual history with absorbing and entertaining accounts of the politics and personalities behind it. He is at his best in describing the story of Sigmund Freud’s one and only visit to America in 1909, for example, where he was accompanied by his friends and colleagues, Carl Jung and Sandor Ferenczi, and found himself traveling on in the same ship as his main critic, William Stern.

While Freud’s trip set the stage for a level of influence in America that far surpassed anything he ever achieved in Europe—at one point more than 70 percent of American psychiatric patients were receiving some version of Freudian-based psychoanalytic care—it almost didn’t happen. The timing was bad and, more to the point, the $400 honorarium was too low.

Jung urged Freud to reconsider. Think of all those rich American potential patients, he said, some of whom Jung himself had begun treating for astronomical fees. Eventually the stars aligned, the dates were changed, and most important, the honorarium was increased to $750. Freud accepted.

But although Freud may have impressed America, the feeling was not mutual. “America,” he would later remark, “is gigantic—a gigantic mistake.” It was, he informed Arnold Zweig, an “anti-Paradise” populated by “savages” and swindlers, and it ought to be renamed “Dollaria.” So Freud came to America for the money, only to attack it for being all about the money? Sounds like classic projection.

Scull also excels in his account of the highly subjective forces behind ostensibly objective psychiatric science, particularly as it involves the DSM, or Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, which was designed to formalize and systematize the practice of psychiatry. When I was a resident, the fourth edition, or DSM-4, was the bible of psychiatry. A diagnosis did not exist unless it was included in the volume, and a patient could not be given that diagnosis unless their symptoms and presentation satisfied the checklist required to meet it.

Like any rule-based system, the
DSM could be gamed. But Scull masterfully shows how it was a game from the start, the product of a bit of science and a lot of politics, personality, and financial interest. With each subsequent edition of the DSM, the number and variety of official psychiatric conditions ballooned to the point where something could be found for practically anyone. This was a boon for the pharmaceutical industry. Meanwhile, the basis for all these new mental illnesses became ever more removed from both common sense and scientific evidence. The DSM revision process has become a disastrous one, full of backbiting, recriminations, and accusation.

Scull caps the book with a devastating critique of contemporary psychiatry, which likes to congratulate itself, as does the rest of medicine, that evidence-based medicine and clinical trials have freed it from the quackery of the past. Now at least we know what works, right? Not so fast. Scull convincingly argues that between industry-sponsored trials, cherry-picking of data, and a publishing bias for positive results, not to mention the usual venal influences of money and corruption, the system has “often produced evidence-biased medicine rather than evidence-based medicine.”

Worse yet, a meticulous review of the evidence, biased as it is in favor of positive results, leads him to two damning conclusions. First, when it comes to devastating psychiatric illnesses such as schizophrenia and bipolar disease, the new drugs are no better than the old. Second, when it comes to more ubiquitous illnesses such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse, even the best drugs we have are barely better than placebos.

Of course, it’s only fair to ask, could Scull himself be biased? After all, it stands to reason that just as a medical journal prefers a study proving that a drug works to one proving that it doesn’t, an author may prefer to sound alarm bells rather than an all clear.

So allow me to share, from the trenches of clinical medicine, my perspective as a doctor who is not a psychiatrist but for whom, as for all primary-care docs, mental illness is a significant part of what I see daily.

The good news is that the tools we have—therapy and drugs—often help, sometimes a lot. The neutral news is that there’s a big placebo effect. The high news is that the tools we have—therapy and drugs—often help, sometimes a lot. The neutral news is that there’s a big placebo effect.

So if Scull is overstating his critique, I can’t see it from my perch. The state of mental-health care today can best be compared to the mediocre Catskill resort in the old Jewish joke: The food is terrible, and such small portions!

I like to teach medical students that when a disease has lots of treatments, it means that none of them really works. In the case of psychiatry, Scull makes a strong argument that one root cause is the lack of a unifying theory of mental illness.

Over the course of Desperate Remedies, Scull traces two oscillating schools of thought that parallel the old nature vs. nurture debate. Is mental illness due to chemistry or culture? Is the culprit neurological or psychological? Biology or society?

It’s a dichotomy that originated centuries ago. Today we have mostly called a truce and agree that when it comes to mental illness, both nature and nurture play a role. But a truce is not a peace. The conventional treatment of therapy and drugs suggests that we remain stuck in the mold, covering our bases while missing something fundamental.

In fin-de-siècle Vienna, while the 38-year-old Freud was developing his theory of the unconscious, the 15-year-old Einstein was sitting in his room in Munich conducting thought experiments. The story goes that young Einstein posed himself a question: If I were traveling on a beam of light, what would I see? It was a question that unlocked the door to 20th-century physics. When it comes to mental illness, Scull’s extraordinary book leaves me with the unsettling thought that not only do we lack good answers, but we are still waiting for an Einstein to ask the right questions.

Commentary
His Story Is Insane

Retail Gangster: The Insane, Real-Life Story of Crazy Eddie
By Gary Weiss
Hachette Books, 336 pages

Reviewed by Edward Kosner

The ROMA have their “King of the Gypsies,” and in Israel, they occasionally crown Ariel Sharon or some other hero the latest “King of the Jews.” Should the Jews ever get around to picking a “King of the Goniffs,” there would be plenty of contenders, but the obvious choice would be a little bearded momser in a moth-eaten sweater named Eddie Antar.

Propelled by those hysterical and unforgettable TV and radio commercials blaring “Crazy Eddie!!! His prices are insane!!!,” Antar reigned over an empire of faux cut-rate electronics stores in New York and thereabouts that, at its peak in the late 1980s, numbered more than 50 outlets. After he took the company public, his millions of shares of stock were selling for the equivalent of $86.50 each before splits. Eddie and his relatives ran the enterprise like a corner candy store on steroids until the reckoning—when the whole shebang collapsed under the weight of a run of flagrant but ingenious frauds against suppliers, insurance companies, stockholders, New York State, customers, and one another. Eddie landed in prison along with some of the kin that he had led astray.

The rise and well-deserved fall of Eddie Antar is told in veteran financial journalist Gary Weiss’s Retail Gangster: The Insane Real-Life Story of Crazy Eddie, a rollicking chronicle of malignity, criminality, and family intrigue. The book not only documents Antar’s nefarious antics in lucid detail. It also evokes the saga of the Syrian Jews who fled the depredations of their Turkish overlords for the promised land of America in the early 20th century and prospered, mostly honestly, beyond their dreams.

Even with the best intentions and fingertips sandpapered for sensitivity, it’s all but impossible to write about Antar without reawakening all those age-old anti-Semitic tropes about crooked Jewish business practices. There’s nobody to blame for this more than Crazy Eddie himself. He came from a traditional family. His grandfather Murad and his brood arrived in this country from the Bahsita slum of Aleppo in 1920 and settled in Brooklyn along with other Sephardim who thought of themselves as “S-Y’s, distinct from the unsophisticated “J-Dub” Ashkenazi immigrants from Eastern Europe.

Eddie was a lively boy nicknamed “Kelso” after a racehorse of the day famed for his speed and stamina. He dropped out of school in the ninth grade and so was a truant, a delinquent from the age of 15. Instead of high school, he matriculated at a series of clip joints around Times Square, peddling cameras and electronics to tourists from the sticks. There, he’d safio—S-Y slang for ripoff—the yokels, Weiss writes, by getting them to pay $250 for a $25 camera.

Eddie did graduate work at two stores back home on Kings Highway in Brooklyn, installed there by his father Sam, who had ownership interest in both. The customers were smart Jews, and he earned a fraction of the take he had scored in the clip joints, but he learned plenty. Just turned 21, he married Debbi Rosen, a J-Dub, and his father set him up in an electronics store with two other relatives. It was early 1969, and crazy-like-a-fox Eddie was launched.

His partner in the decades-long crime spree to come was another relative, his younger cousin Sam A. Antar, known in the book as Sammy. For years, Eddie had been mentoring Sammy and protecting him from schoolyard bullies. To celebrate Sammy’s bar mitzvah, Eddie took “today you are a man” literally and treated the boy to a neighborhood prostitute. Later, the Antars sent Sammy to finance school to learn accounting tricks.

Over the years, with Sammy’s assistance on the more intricate maneuvers, Eddie would buy merchandise from mob dealers; pressure and bait-and-switch customers; cheat the state by collecting sales taxes from buyers but not pay them to the government; squirrel away skimmed profits—the neha-kdil—in Israeli and Panamanian banks; pad inventories for fiscal periods by using postdated checks; rip off manufacturers with phony warranty claims; scam insurance companies by rushing damaged or returned goods to warehouses that had caught fire, hosing the...
Customers in Crazy Eddie stores got special treatment. The salesman who first spotted the mark, writes Weiss, “would alert his colleagues in a mix of Arab slang and pig latin: Shoof the eye-gay (keep an eye on the guy). The customer might be a lot eight (a crazy person). Or just some jedge (jerk)... or a lot six (a gay person).” A husho was a shoplifter. Should a mark not buy, the word would be passed: NAD the eye-gay (stop him at the door!) Customers who wouldn’t buy the sketch—the salesmen’s lies—were hudda (sh-t). When a buyer came to the pickup window for his TV or stereo, he might overhear the clerk being told to “go have lunch.” Then he’d wait and wait while out-of-sight workers were cleaning and dressing up a returned damaged Admiral or floor model to pass it off as brand-new.

Eddie had no tolerance for shoplifters or looters. During a 1977 blackout, he hived his Fordham Road store in the Bronx with off-duty NYPD cops, guns at the ready. “If there was going to be crime at a Crazy Eddie,” Weiss writes, “he was going to be the one committing it.”

None of this would have made Crazy Eddie—one of the most famous phonies of his times—insane. But new frauds had to be enlisted to nourish the books. At one desperate point, millions in proceeds were secretly siphoned back from Israel to nourish the books.

None of it worked. Competitors waged a price war that crippled Crazy Eddie’s business. He broke his pledge to investors and dumped more shares. Eddie decided to cut a deal with the feds for a lighter sentence—and for the first time publicly confessed to his crimes. As a model cooperater, Sammy got off with a light sentence of house arrest and probation. Broken and disgraced, Eddie Antar hung on for two more decades. When he died in 2016, he was buried near his kinfolk in the S-Y cemetery on Staten Island. "Eddie was not an outlier," concludes Gary Weiss, “he was a product of his times.” And his chutzpah was insane!!!

Commentary

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Moralizing Without Risk

Metaphysical Animals: How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life
By Clare Mac Cumhail and Rachel Wiseman
Doubleday, 416 pages

Reviewed by Frederic Raphael

METAPHYSICAL Animals carries the “take that, you guys” subtitle How Four Women Brought Philosophy Back to Life. Its authors, both women, make no secret of their tendentious purpose. Yes, yes; why should they? The precocious quartet of Oxonians were and, unusually for philosophers, remained close friends with largely compatible views until the end of their long lives. All four—Mary Midgley, Iris Murdoch, Philippa Foot, and Elizabeth Anscombe—received appreciative obituaries in academic circles. Iris Murdoch alone enjoyed public fame, less as sage than as bestselling and prolific author. When, as a young woman, she told Ludwig Wittgenstein of her ambition to be a novelist, he gave her a wastepaper basket. As time went by, she made less and less use of it.

Frederic Raphael studied philosophy at Cambridge, which provided the source material for his award-winning television series, The Glittering Prizes. He has published novels, histories, works of philosophy, memoirs, letters, and has won an Oscar.

The first and slimmest of Murdoch’s novels, Under the Net, featured an admiring caricature of this man, whose personality dominated English philosophy during the 1930s and 1940s and whose shade, though fading perhaps, continues to fall on the subject. Philosophy, Wittgenstein concluded, leaves everything as it is. Few philosophers agree. After Wittgenstein’s death, in 1949, my generation of Moral Scientists (as they used to be called in Cambridge, England) adopted him as the Master whose stoic example would lead the world out from under the tyranny of totalitarian ideologies and the false theses that strutted them. After Pope Pius XII’s silence in the face of the Shoah, Christianity seemed never the last, famous academic to purchase, just before the Great War, to prove to them that they had been wasting their time. Too honest to deny that the young Austrian was wrong, Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead, took years to compile the massive Principia Mathematica, but otherwise had little in common, apart from Whitehead’s wife. Wittgenstein arrived, just before the Great War, to prove to them that they had been wasting their time. Too honest to deny that the young Austrian was right in proclaiming that mathematics was logically circular and could never supply a reliable basis for metaphysical certainty, Russell was also too human not to resent it: There is no mention of Wittgenstein in his History of Western Philosophy (or yet of Heidegger).

Philosophy may be a “game,” as Heidegger called it, but it is seldom a friendly one. Its few collaborators rarely cross the finish line hand-in-hand. The most famous pair, Bertrand Russell and Alfred North Whitehead, took years to compile the massive Principia Mathematica, but otherwise had little in common, apart from Whitehead’s wife. Wittgenstein arrived, just before the Great War, to prove to them that they had been wasting their time. Too honest to deny that the young Austrian was right in proclaiming that mathematics was logically circular and could never supply a reliable basis for metaphysical certainty, Russell was also too human not to resent it: There is no mention of Wittgenstein in his History of Western Philosophy (or yet of Heidegger).

The mixed Viennese club (Jews welcome) that came to be known as logical positivism proved more heroic than its founder Moritz Schlick could have guessed. Schlick (assassinated in 1936 by a sexually jealous student) is often presumed, wrongly, to have been a Jew who dared not speak his name. The logical positivists were certainly known to out-shout one another during their coffee-housing, but they had in common a noble fancy that the world could become rational, based on propositions whose truth could be publicly, scientifi-
Truman’s decision to use The Big One was presidential, not personal. A long list of American casualties that could be avoided would, and should, have weighed more heavily on his conscience than any refined scruples.

THE WOMEN first declared their mature, corporate femininity in 1956 when, as junior academics, they dared to challenge the Oxford all-male Senate’s proposal to bestow an honorary degree on former President Harry Truman. Their principal and principled objection was that Truman had been responsible for signing the order to drop the first atom bomb on Hiroshima (and the second on Nagasaki), thus bringing the war to an abrupt and merciless end by incinerating tens of thousands of innocent Japanese civilians.

A quasi-philosophical question occurs immediately: Can the acquiescent population of a belligerent power that deliberately commits an act that will, in FDR’s words, “live in infamy” be accused of “innocence”? Did Hiroshima have no place in the armaments industry? Is it relevant that, from 1937 onward, imperial Japan had waged an unprovoked war with all but exterminatory ruthlessness? There followed the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Chinese, the majority civilians.

Truman’s decision was so obnoxious to G.E.M. Anscombe—one of the four, who was Wittgenstein’s Roman Catholic scribe and translator—that she regarded it as a sin. Had the matter been left to the moralizing females, who questions that they would have honored their righteous principles? Truman’s decision, on the other hand, was determined not by personal scruples, or their absence, but by the president’s sworn obligation to uphold the interests of the United States and its citizens. It was not for him to behave as a moralizing individual might. To decide to pursue the war in the Pacific only by conventional means, island by island before an invasion of the Japanese mainland, would have entailed the deaths of perhaps hundreds of thousands of American servicemen. Would that have been “better,” in some metaphysical moral register, than using The Big One? The quartet thought so; but Truman’s decision was presidential, not personal. A long, long list of American casualties that could be avoided would, and should, have weighed more heavily on his conscience than any refined scruples.

Truman’s memoirs carry no regretful afterthought. The question of whether the U.S. should proceed with the development of the hydrogen bomb was also presidential and had to be hard-nosed, in view of the USSR’s likely purposes. Hence Truman’s dismissive description of J. Robert Oppenheimer (father of the Hiroshima bomb) as a “cry-baby” on account of his conscientious objection to taking the next “logical” step in securing the defence and well-being of the United States. Truman’s later conduct confirmed that, as he reminded himself by a sign on his Oval Office desk, “The Buck Stops Here.” The Oxford moralists make no mention of the president’s abrupt refusal of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur’s wish to use the bomb against China, the palpably ally of North Korea in a current war.
Truman immediately fired and retired the five-star MacArthur, despite his almost mythical place in the war against the Japanese and his subsequent proconsular rule over the democratization of Japan and its enrollment among America’s allies. MacArthur was granted a ticker-tape farewell parade in New York before he faded away. Truman’s action, despite its at-the-time unpopularity, is evidence that neither recklessness nor savagery was an abiding characteristic of the president who stood boldly and unequivocally against the strident menace of the USSR.

In The Sovereignty of Good (1970), Murdoch advocates a neo-Platonism that demands we always tell the truth. A cited instance of that moral rigor has it that, if asked by an S.S. officer whether there are Jews hiding in the house, the requirement to be truthful, even if it leads to the arrest and murder of any old Ann Frank, must override any other consideration. Could there be any more chilling proclamation of the abrogation of personal responsibility? Her nostalgia for some unselfish notion of virtue goes back to Murdoch’s youthful membership in the Communist Party.

Elizabeth Anscombe’s seven children testify to the sincerity of her Catholicism. Reliance on its precepts and her devotion to Wittgenstein inspired her and her always sockless husband, Peter Geach, to give her idol, the scion of the second-richest Jew in the world of his time, a Christian burial. This was of a piece with her co-religionists in Europe in centuries previous, who had had no compunction in sequestering and baptizing the children of deported Jews. When survivors sought reunion with their offspring, they were not infrequently lied to, for moral reasons, about their location or led to believe that they had died. Such is the abiding influence of metaphysics and its castles in the air.

The quartet celebrated in Metaphysical Animals had the common luxury of moralizing without risk of practical consequences. The upper-crusty Oxonian males decided to proceed with honoring Truman, whose appearance excited no known objection among students or citizens. No mention is made of his presidential endorsement of the Marshall Plan, without which Europe’s economy might well never have had its spectacular resurgence.

No one questions the quartet’s right to scrupulous objection. Is it unkind (“inappropriate” is the current cant) to remark that it was based on no undeniably philosophical principle? Is it a slur on these four women to suspect that their parade of moral refinement was not without an element of self-importance, self-advancement even? Failure to consider that possibility, among other complacencies, deprives Metaphysical Animals of a claim to be more than a generous and gossipy encomium.
And then we cut to the interior of Ailes’s office.

Andrew’s pitch was simple: Take Greg’s off-beat brand of anti-liberal humor and put it on very late at night. Make the show simple and cheap—just a small table and high stools—and let Greg run a Mad Tea Party conversation. The show will be different from anything else on the air, Andrew promised, because the subjects will be things that we think are funny. Things like liberals, the New York Times, Nancy Pelosi, Hollywood weirdos, Earth Day, and Oprah Winfrey’s The Secret. And the guests will be stars from the center-right universe—writers and journalists and (surprisingly) punk-rock stars, people who wouldn’t otherwise be invited on a mainstream television talk show.

It’s a measure of Ailes’s brilliance that his first question was “How cheap?”

That was the beginning of Greg Gutfeld’s first obscure television project, Red Eye, which aired on Fox News Channel at 3 a.m. on the East Coast and a more reasonable 12 a.m. in California.

Red Eye was the television equivalent of his hide-in-plain-sight HuffPo blog. It was hard to find unless you stumbled onto it, but bizarre and refreshing when you did. To his eternal credit, Ailes kept it on despite its low ratings and general weirdness—“I don’t get it,” Ailes once said to me, “is it funny?”—and watched as Greg developed into a Fox News audience favorite.

But while this was all unfolding, the late-night television landscape was in turmoil. Jimmy Fallon had taken over Tonight from Jay Leno and returned the show to its New York roots. Stephen Colbert took over The Late Show from its founder, David Letterman. Los Angeles–based Jimmy Kimmel was in the mix with ABC’s Jimmy Kimmel Live!

At this point, television viewers interested in talk shows could only choose among Jimmy Fallon, Stephen Colbert, Jimmy Kimmel, and Trevor Noah. The audience got sliced into very thin wedges. Suddenly, being intensely political became a big advantage. After all, if “winning” means garnering a larger slice of a diminishing pie, it makes sense to appeal to a dedicated and passionate audience. And Republican-haters, as nightly talk-show hosts found out, are a very loyal audience.

The winner in the Who Can Hate Republicans the Most Contest could rely on about 1.5 million Demo-
SOME OF THE most unforgettable movies ever made tell their stories in flashback. *Citizen Kane* begins with Charles Foster Kane's last words—“Rosebud!”—and works back from there. *Sunset Boulevard* opens on William Holden's corpse floating in a swimming pool and then tells how he landed there.

It's also a staple of teen movies and television shows from the 1980s. We fade in on the appealing young star in the middle of some kind of outrageous situation. There's a freeze-frame accompanied by the sound of a vinyl-record scratch, and then a voice-over: “Yep, that's me. You're probably wondering how I got here. I guess I should start at the beginning...”

That's the way I'm going to tell the following true story.

We fade in on a close-up of a media news outlet. The outlet is reporting that at the end of September 2022, Fox News Channel's late-night show *Gutfeld!* has established itself as the most popular late-night television show around, consistently drawing bigger audiences than its big network competitors—which include such broadcast institutions as CBS's *Late Show with Stephen Colbert* and NBC's *Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*.

In 2005, arch-conservative-turned-liberal media entrepreneur Ariana Huffington was convinced by Internet impresario Andrew Breitbart to start a group blog called “The Huffington Post.” Maybe you've heard of it.

This was around the same time as the founding of Twitter (2006) and a year or so after the premiere of *The Apprentice*, starring Donald Trump (2004). We didn't know at the time just how weird American culture and politics were about to become.

Andrew Breitbart recruited a dozen or so writers to join Ariana's celebrity friends on the blog, including a then-unknown magazine editor named Greg Gutfeld. After a few desultory posts and a few unhappy interactions with his fellow contributors, Greg decided to contribute to *The Huffington Post* by creating a secret place for his posts. Hidden from the prying eyes of the editors—and most of the readers—he would upload his words to the Biography section of his Contributor Profile page.

Gutfeld would write surreal posts making fun of Hollywood liberals, environmentalists, progressive elites—“woke culture” before we knew what to call it. It was delightful and hilarious and deeply weird, like the author himself. And it also seemed naughty and wrong. Hidden somewhere on Planet Huffington was a cackling, disrespectful Rebel Outpost.

In other words, a kind of speakeasy blog. You had to know it was there to read it. And you'd know it was there because Andrew Breitbart told everyone. Including, it turned out, the diabolical genius behind Fox News Channel, Roger Ailes.

We're now at The Middle of the story. At this point, we cut to the exterior of an airplane flying to New York, followed by an establishing shot of the Fox News building on Sixth Avenue, over which we hear Roger Ailes's voice asking, “So what did you want to see me about, Andrew?”

Rob Long has been the executive producer of six TV series.
Democracy Thrives in Israel

A new report ranks the Jewish state as one of the world’s strongest, most equitable democracies—despite baseless falsehoods about its oppression of Palestinians. While enemies accuse Israel of apartheid, genocide, and rights violations, they offer little convincing evidence. To the contrary, Israel has a superb record of civil liberties, elections, rule of law and equal opportunity at all levels of society, ranking it the world’s 23rd most successful democracy.

What are the facts?

Israel receives outsized condemnation for its alleged treatment of Arab-Israeli citizens, as well as Palestinian Arabs living in surrounding disputed territories. In stark contrast to such poorly supported accusations, the new “Democracy Index 2021” by EIU—the Economist Intelligence Unit—ranks Israel as one of the most thriving democracies in the world, scoring it higher than the United States, Spain, Italy and some 139 other nations. The index ranks countries according to 51 criteria, covering each nation’s performance according to its 1) electoral process and pluralism; 2) functioning of government; 3) political participation; 4) political culture; and 5) civil liberties. Israel’s 2021 ranking shows consistent improvement in its democratic processes compared with the first such report in 2006, when the Jewish state ranked only 47. In the current report, Israel was lauded for its inclusion of an Arab party in today’s ruling government coalition.

No surprise, since Israel’s robust democracy has a vibrant electoral tradition, stable governing institutions, high political participation among its citizens, a vigorous, even boisterous political culture, and broad, equal civil liberties for all its citizens.

Unfortunately, even as Israel’s democracy improved in the past year, the EIU noted that democracy globally actually deteriorated. This was due to the Covid-19 pandemic, causing “an unprecedented withdrawal of civil liberties,” including “a huge extension of state power over large areas of public and personal life.”

In contrast to Israel were Middle Eastern regimes, the highest ranking of which was Tunisia, reaching only 75th place—and then not as a democracy, but as a “hybrid regime.” The territory of Palestine was ranked as an “authoritarian” regime in 109th place.

Like all countries in the index, Israel’s performance in the EIU evaluation was based on the health and performance of democratic institutions among its citizens.

While critics often unfairly blame Israel for a lack of democratic freedoms in Judea and Samaria (“the West Bank”) and Gaza, they ignore the fact that the Oslo Accords give governance responsibilities of Palestinians in those territories almost entirely to their respective dictatorships—the Palestinian Authority and Hamas.

Unfortunately, neither of these Palestinian governments holds regular elections, supports basic civil liberties—like freedoms of speech, assembly and religion—or enforces rule of law. Neither respects women’s equality, and both violently persecute members of LGBTQ and religious minorities.

Anti-Israel commentators usually neglect to acknowledge that Palestinians have been waging terrorist war against Israel’s existence since the state’s birth in 1948. Much of Palestinian suffering results from Israel defending itself against these unrelenting attacks, as well as obstinate Palestinian refusal to accept multiple offers of land for peace and a state of their own.

Israel’s “nation-state law” has also been unfairly attacked. The law declares that the country exists to fulfill the Jewish people’s “right to self-determination.” This criticism, however, is a red herring, attempting to discredit a statute that in no way limits Israel’s democratic liberties. Note that this law does not infringe on the rights of individual Israelis, including its two million Arab citizens. Like many other nation states, it merely formalizes symbols of its people—in this case the Jewish people—such as the flag, national anthem, and holidays.

Note, too, that while the nation-state law declares Hebrew to be the national language, this is not different than in the United States, in which English is the mother tongue. Nor does Israel’s nation-state law establish any official religion—unlike some seven European countries that declare state religions in their very constitutions.

In short, Israel can be a proud nation of the Jewish people while still cherishing and improving one of the most ethnically diverse and freest democracies on earth. In fact, some would argue that it is precisely Jewish values of compassion and justice that help fortify and help guarantee Israel’s robust democracy.

No matter which slanderous accusations Israel’s enemies employ, the Jewish state objectively remains one of the strongest and most successful democracies on earth, providing political freedoms and economic opportunities unmatched in the majority of the world’s nations. Moreover, the suffering and plight of the Palestinians has little to do with Israel and is almost entirely the result of authoritarian governance by its terrorist dictatorial regimes and their obstinate refusal to make peace.

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