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By Eli Lake
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To the Editor:

MOSHE Krakowski’s article “The Jew of the Jews” (October 2022) contains some misstatements about Pew Research Center’s 2020 survey of Jewish Americans that require correction or clarification.

The author writes that the Center “did not recruit any Haredim to help conduct interviews.” It’s true that there were no Haredi interviewers. But neither were there any Modern Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or non-Jewish interviewers. In fact, there were no interviewers at all. This was a self-administered survey in which the respondents filled in their answers themselves, either online or on paper.

Krakowski contends that “choices baked into the Pew study’s design all but guaranteed that few Haredim would participate,” noting that the survey was not administered in Yiddish and that it “used paper ballots rather than phone surveys, ensuring that most Hasidim would toss this foreign-language (English) mailing in the trash.”

It is true that the survey was not conducted by telephone—because response rates to phone surveys have plummeted. But the research team, which I led, did make special efforts to reach Orthodox Jews, including Haredim. The survey was conducted nationwide, with mailings to randomly selected residential addresses in all 50 states. No lists of Jewish names or Jewish community members were used. But the country was divided into layers, or strata, allowing researchers to “oversample” areas where many Jews reside. More letters were mailed in those areas than in other parts of the country. (Crucially, researchers take this into account when they weight the data, ensuring that respondents in each geographic area are represented in proportion to their true share of the U.S. population.)

The research team prioritized reaching Orthodox respondents, including Haredim, by creating a special stratum consisting of three counties—Kings and Rockland Counties in New York and Ocean County in New Jersey—that have large Haredi communities. Each of the initial letters mailed in those counties (as elsewhere) contained $2 in cash, as a trust-building measure, and qualified respondents were offered additional incentives (typically $10 or $20) to complete the survey. If potential respondents tossed the mailings in the trash, they were literally throwing money away.

More than 68,000 adults across the country responded to the survey, including 4,718 adults who identified as Jewish. Of those, about 430 indicated they are Orthodox Jews, including more than 200 who indi-
cated they are Haredim (an umbrella category that includes Yeshivish or Litvish individuals as well as Hasidim). Once the data were weighted, they resulted in an estimate that about 2 percent of U.S. adults are Jewish, and that about 9 percent of Jewish adults are Orthodox.

Among Orthodox Jews, the survey found rising percentages of Haredim in younger age cohorts—a strong sign of demographic growth. Indeed, the first page of our report on the findings, *Jewish Americans in 2020*, says that “fully one-in-ten U.S. Jewish adults under the age of 30 are Haredim.” Krakowski’s article omits the word “adults” from that sentence, suggesting that the estimate includes children under 18, which it does not. Then he adds that “there are good reasons to think this is a serious undercount.”

Every estimate has some uncertainty around it, and estimates concerning small subgroups in a survey have especially large margins of error. So I agree: The estimate that 10 percent of American Jews between the ages of 18 and 29 are Haredim could be an undercount.

But it’s very difficult to know whether it actually is an undercount. Krakowski offers no evidence on this score—no data from other sources on the size of the Haredi community, for example. He suggests that Haredim are hard to survey without special efforts, but he doesn’t seem to know what efforts were made in 2020. Nor does he say what it would take to do a better job.

And that’s the rub. At present, the Haredi population is at the outer limits of what a scientific survey of the overall U.S. public can capture. Even if there were twice as many Haredim as the 2020 survey indicated, they would still make up far less than 1 percent of U.S. adults, well below the margin of error in most national studies.
That doesn’t mean Haredim can’t be studied. It means that other kinds of studies are needed. Ethnographies, in which researchers closely observe members of a community, can help. So, perhaps, can in-depth interviews with small samples of people who are willing to be interviewed but who are not statistically representative of all Haredim. Orthodox communities could also try to survey their own members through synagogues, schools, and so on.

All these methods have disadvantages and advantages. No single piece of research can tell us everything we’d like to know.

Two final points. Krakowski asserts that Pew Research Center’s 2013 survey of U.S. Jews, which he incorrectly dates to 2013–15, offered an “absurd” picture of Haredim. Actually, Orthodox Jews—and especially Haredim—appear consistently in the 2013 survey as the most traditional and observant part of the Jewish population, with the largest families, on average, and near-zero rates of intermarriage.

Absurdities emerge only if you ignore the totality of the data and scour the results in search of anomalies. There are only a tiny number of them, and they have been well explained over the years. The question about handling money on the Sabbath, for example, was worded in a way that probably confused some respondents. It asked whether they “refrain” from handling money, so that answering “no” meant that, yes, they do handle money on Shabbat. This wording was taken verbatim from a previous national-Jewish-population study. It clearly was flawed and has not been used again. And, yet, even with its flaws, it showed that Orthodox Jews (Haredim in particular) are much more likely than other Jews to abstain from handling money on the Sabbath.

Last, Krakowski claims that Haredim are “the most rapidly growing segment of American Jewry.” That’s possible, but it may depend on who counts as Jewish, because another potential claimant is the secular Jewish population, which has been growing by leaps and bounds. While national surveys are unable to dig as deeply as one might like into relatively small subgroups—such as Haredim, Jews of color, or Jews in a particular city or state—they have the advantage of capturing the broad spectrum of Jewish life and engagement. One key takeaway from the 2020 survey is that there is growth at both ends of that spectrum.

Alan Cooperman
Director of Religion Research
Pew Research Center
Washington, D.C.

Moshe Krakowski writes:

I APPRECIATE Alan Cooperman’s acknowledgment of my central points about Pew’s approach to Haredim. He concedes that no Haredim were involved in Pew’s survey process, that the survey was not translated into Yiddish for respondents (even though it was translated into Spanish and Russian), and that responses to the 2013 study on Orthodox Jews were flawed. (Though he understates just how flawed—1 percent of Haredim had Christmas trees? Fifteen percent attend non-Jewish religious services at least few times a year? Were these all just bad questions?)

Mr. Cooperman believes that Pew took measures to solicit Haredi responses. But these measures didn’t do much to take Haredi behaviors into account, reflecting just the sort of disregard for Haredi life that my essay addressed. Mr. Cooperman seems to think, for example, that Haredim should have jumped at a $10 offering, something that says more, perhaps, about his view of Haredim than about Haredim themselves. The failure to include Haredi voices in the survey design and implementation ensured that questions and incentives that would have mattered to Haredim were ignored.

There may be good reasons to think that phone surveys are not ideal for the general population. But if you want to understand a population that seriously restricts Internet use, the opposite is true. As the 2020 Pew report notes: “It’s possible that the 2020 web/mail survey may not have been as effective as the 2013 phone survey at reaching segments of the Jewish population who are uncomfortable with going online or lack access to the Internet.” This was a deliberate choice on Pew’s part. So, too, was taking the trouble to obtain data from Russian and Spanish speakers but not Yiddish ones.

Likewise, Pew’s questions uniformly reflected issues central to non-Haredi American Jewish experiences (such as Israel and Zionism) and included no questions particular to Haredi sensibilities or sense of self-identity (e.g., how often do you consult a religious authority regarding life decisions?).

Despite Mr. Cooperman’s belief that large-scale surveys just can’t capture Haredim, the upshot of these choices—and make no mistake, they were choices—was survey data that almost certainly missed large numbers of Haredim and failed to tell us much of substance about their lives.

Three final points: It’s true that I omitted the word “adults” in paraphrasing Pew’s estimate that 10 percent of American Jews under 30 are Haredim, although adding it would have strengthened my point
Commentary

Right and Left on Boys

To the Editor:

NaoMi SCHAeFeR Riley’s review of my book is headlined “The Idea Thief” (October). As the alleged thief, I feel it necessary to put the record straight. According to Riley, my book Of Boys and Men “simultaneously rips off the right while condescending to, belittling, and insulting those who saw long ago what he sees now.”

Disagreement is one thing. Accusations of intellectual dishonesty are quite another. Especially when they are wholly without merit, as anyone who has read the book can attest.

Exhibit A for Riley’s prosecution is my treatment of her fellow AEI scholar, Christina Hoff Sommers. The specific claim is that I repeated arguments made in Sommers’s 2000 book, The War Against Boys, without due credit. As Riley writes, “giving Sommers short shrift in a volume that follows in a direct line from hers is the worst kind of intellectual dishonesty.”

I do, however, quote (p. 26) and cite (p. 120) Sommers, with reference to the gender wage gap and to her book The War Against Boys. Indeed, Sommers herself read my book in draft and gave me some good feedback, for which I was grateful, and which I incorporated in the final version of the book. She then went on to endorse the book. I was delighted to put her words on the back cover: “In this judicious and meticulously researched book, Richard Reeves reminds us that the problem of male disaffection and underachievement is worsening, and points to sensible, humane and practical solutions.”

Readers can likely draw their own conclusions about the veracity of Riley’s accusation here.

What of Riley’s broader claim that I stole ideas from conservatives without acknowledgement? This is utterly absurd. As well as Hoff Sommers, I quote, sometimes with some approval, the views of many conservative writers and scholars, including George Gilder (p. 41–2, 127), Kay Hymowitz, (p. x), AEI’s Charles Murray (p. 125), Geoff Dench (pp. 33, 34, 37, 124, 127), Jordan Peterson (123–5), David Blankenhorn (37–38), Oren Cass (148), AEI’s Daniel Cox (68), Steve Ruggles (37), AEI’s Scott Winship (49), and many more.

I have plenty of faults. But intellectual theft and dishonesty are not among them. This is not simply a matter of setting the personal record straight, however. When one scholar accuses another of intellectual dishonesty, without a shred of supporting evidence, our public discourse simply takes another turn for the worse.

Richard V. Reeves
Washington, D.C.

Naomi Schaefer Riley writes:

I CANNOT EXPLAIN why Christina Hoff Sommers did not criticize Richard Reeves for failing to give her proper credit for the pioneering work she has done in this field. I can only presume that politeness and modesty prevented her from doing so.

As I wrote in my review, Reeves cites Sommers once to tell us that “some conservatives go so far as to claim that there is a feminist-inspired ... ‘war on boys,’” but that doing so only “validates and fuels a sense of victimhood” and that “such claims float free of the facts.” Moreover, he claims that the “conservative goal here is to whip up the partisan base.” I have read Sommers’s work for a long time and would be hard-pressed to think of a time the woman who hosted a video blog called “The Factual Feminist” was just trying to “whip up the partisan base.”
In the second and final instance, he quotes Sommers as saying that the wage gap “is a massively discredited factoid.” To which Reeves responds that the wage gap is “not a myth. It is math.” As if Sommers and other conservatives—what?—don’t understand math.

In fact, if Reeves had done more than just list a book title of Kay Hymowitz’s and deeply considered some of her work, he might have noticed how frequently over the past decade she has carefully explained what he finally acknowledges, that having children takes women on different career courses and that single, childless women are now out-earning men in many contexts. And so when controlling for childbearing and child-rearing, the wage gap actually is a myth.

My review did not suggest Reeves failed to mention conservatives, merely that he failed to give them credit for saying things over the past quarter of a century or more that he has only now come to understand. Quoting Charles Murray to criticize his beliefs about custody agreements hardly fits the bill. Neither does noting that Daniel Cox has done surveys recently showing men have fewer friends. Nor does citing Scott Winship on black men’s failure to achieve economic mobility.

Reeves seems to be under the impression that sprinkling in the names of conservative authors would create some kind of intellectual shield, that we wouldn’t notice that his book’s main arguments—that it is boys who are falling behind academically, economically, and socially; that our educational institutions are failing them; that pretending girls and boys are not different from each other has had deeply harmful effects; that the rise of out-of-wedlock birth has left men without purpose and meaning as fathers; and that in order to help boys and men, we need to undo years of feminist propaganda in the media and pop culture about how girls are the only ones who need support—are what folks on the right have been saying for decades.

We’re happy to welcome Mr. Reeves to the club. Perhaps he could be a little more respectful to the members who preceded him.
We have tee shirts. We have tote bags. We have sweatshirts.

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The End of Affirmative Action?

MATTHEW CONTINETTI

In 1978, the Supreme Court ruled that colleges may use race as a factor in student admissions, so long as they avoid numerical racial quotas. In 2003, and again in 2016, the Court upheld the constitutionality of preferences to achieve a racially diverse student body. Yet the Court has never seemed entirely comfortable with race-based admissions, for understandable reasons. Counting by race violates the principle of a colorblind Constitution. It's contrary to the 14th Amendment and to the Civil Rights Act. It's unfair and unjust and it often hurts the very people it is trying to help.

The Court's near half century of discomfort with racial preferences is no secret. Its decisions on the matter have been filled with phrases, such as "narrowly tailored" and "limited in time," that seem like constraints but only raise more questions. There have been moments when the Court has thrown up its hands and wished the entire problem would just disappear. "We expect," wrote Associate Justice Sandra Day O'Connor in Grutter v. Bollinger (2003), "that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary to further the interest [in diversity] approved today."

Well, time's up. On October 31 the Supreme Court heard arguments in Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard and Students for Fair Admissions v. University of North Carolina. Like before, the Court will decide whether the schools discriminated against applicants when determining the makeup of incoming classes. Unlike before, however, the plaintiffs are non-white. They are Asian American.

Also, unlike before, the Court is not expected to be mealy-mouthed when it issues its judgment. "Supreme Court Seems Ready to Throw Out Race-Based College Admissions," read the headline in the New York Times on the day after the summary of arguments. Hardly anybody in Washington believes that race-based college admissions will withstand the Court's 6–3 conservative majority. The math simply isn't there. Chief Justice John Roberts, a crucial swing vote, is a noted skeptic of racial preferences. Color-conscious affirmative action's days are numbered, in other words. And another decades-old precedent may soon be overturned.

Liberals aren't happy. Long ago they abandoned the pursuit of racial equality for racial "equity"—where, in the words of Vice President Kamala Harris, "we all end up in the same place." Color-consciousness is an essential part of this worldview. Outlawing affirmative action, after all, would shift decision-making power from Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion officers to measures of attainment such as grade point averages and standardized tests.

Consequently, the left has treated the affirmative-action cases as racial analogues to last term's Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, in which the Court reversed the Roe v. Wade (1973) decision and restored abortion law to the states. After Dobbs, the media portrayed the Court as antidemocratic, counter-majoritarian, and contemptuous of public opinion. And they had half a point. The polls really did show

Matthew Continetti is a senior fellow and the Patrick and Charlene Neal Chair in American Prosperity at the American Enterprise Institute.
that the public was against overturning Roe v. Wade. For *Washington Post* columnist Ruth Marcus, the Students for Fair Admissions cases, like Dobbs, have been taken up by a “heedless” Court eager to embroil itself “in some of the most inflammatory issues confronting the nation” after a “cataclysmic” term.

There’s a problem with this analysis, however. For most of the public, affirmative action is not an “inflammatory issue.” It is a settled one. And that settlement, judging from polling data and electoral returns, has been remarkably durable and overwhelmingly lopsided. Americans support general efforts to promote opportunity and inclusion. But they oppose the explicit use of race as a criterion in college admissions, hiring, and promotion. The Court won’t be risking a backlash if it ends affirmative action. It will be on the side of the people.

The public has been against preferences since they were first imposed. And today’s anti-preferences coalition includes not just whites, but also members of racial and ethnic minorities. A Pew Research Center poll from the spring of 2020 found that 73 percent of Americans did not believe that race or ethnicity should factor into college admissions. Majorities of self-identified white, black, Hispanic, and Asian respondents all said race or ethnicity should not be a factor. Pew ran the same poll this year. The numbers had not changed.

Similarly, an October 2022 *Washington Post*–George Mason University poll found that 63 percent of Americans would support a Supreme Court decision “banning colleges and universities from considering a student’s race and ethnicity when making decisions about student admissions.” Racial preferences are a 70–30 issue. The left is on the wrong side.

It is true that, on occasion, one encounters vague and evasive polling questions that do not offer specifics about the content of the affirmative-action programs under consideration. Such polls obscure the anti-preference reality. A 2017 Pew poll, for instance, found that 71 percent of Americans said, “affirmative action programs designed to increase the number of black and minority students on college campuses” are “a good thing.” And the same *Washington Post*–George Mason University poll that found a large majority wanting to end race-based admissions also found that 64 percent of Americans “think programs designed to increase the racial diversity of students on college campuses” are a “good thing.”

The tacit assumption in both polls is that selecting by race is the only way one might achieve a racially diverse campus. That assumption is false. Race-neutral affirmative-action programs also can lead to greater diversity. And such programs are compatible with a color-blind Constitution.

“Many people are uncomfortable with the concept of singling out racial minorities for special treatment if it means other students will have to meet a higher standard,” write Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux and Zoha Qamar of FiveThirtyEight.com, “even though they also want universities to have racially diverse student bodies.” Thomson-DeVeaux and Qamar ascribe this apparent contradiction to public “ambivalence” toward affirmative action.

Yet public sentiment is neither contradictory nor ambivalent. The public is merely distinguishing between the end of diversity and the means of discrimination. It wants the former without resorting to the latter. And well it should.

If Americans truly believed that only race-based policies can bring about a diverse society, then one would expect them to support color-consciousness when it is put to a vote. They don’t. They reject it. And not just in red states. In 1996, California voters approved Proposition 209 and banned discrimination by race in public employment, education, and contracting. Almost a quarter of a century later, in 2020, Californians were asked to vote on Proposition 16, which would have repealed Prop 209. It lost by a 14-point margin.

Affirmative action has been rejected practically everywhere it appears on the ballot. The exception is Colorado, where an initiative modeled on Prop 209 lost narrowly in 2008. As of this writing, nine states ban racial preferences. If such bans have provoked widespread protest, I must have missed it.

For too long, the Court has said that discrimination by race is necessary to solve the problem of discrimination by race. The result has been a legal morass, a constitutional tragedy, and general racial alienation. If the Court fixes its mistake this term, its legitimacy won’t be questioned. Its integrity won’t be endangered. The will of the people won’t be subverted. It will be affirmed. 

### Commentary

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*Americans support general efforts to promote opportunity and inclusion. But they oppose the explicit use of race as a criterion in college admissions, hiring, and promotion. The Court won’t be risking a backlash if it ends affirmative action. It will be on the side of the people.*

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*Zoha Qamar of FiveThirtyEight.com, “even though they also want universities to have racially diverse student bodies.”*
WHAT DUTY DO journalists have to the public when it comes to reporting on the health of politicians and political candidates? And what happens when facts about a candidate’s health belie the story the media want to tell?

In May, John Fetterman, a Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate in Pennsylvania, suffered a serious stroke. Days later, he won his party’s primary, and his wife, Gisele, appeared on stage to describe the stroke as “a little hiccup.” For weeks, his campaign released little information about his condition, and for three months he made no public appearances. The only evidence that he was in the race was his campaign’s regular trolling of his opponent, Mehmet Oz, on Twitter. He repeatedly refused to debate Oz.

So in October, when NBC News reporter Dasha Burns landed the first on-camera interview with Fetterman since the stroke, it was a big story. Fetterman’s campaign had refused to release any medical records or assessments beyond a brief statement from his doctor that he “has no work restrictions and can work full duty in public office.” But as Burns told her colleague Lester Holt on-air, Fetterman required captioning for the interview, which is not uncommon for people with auditory-processing challenges. She also noted, “In small talk before my interview without captioning, it wasn’t clear he understood what I was saying.”

This single observation proved to be an ideological trip wire. Burns instantly came under attack from journalists and Left Twitter for being “ableist” and “disgraceful.” The View’s Sunny Hostin said it was “inappropriate” for Burns to report on what she saw and that it “broke journalistic ethics.” Podcaster Kara Swisher tweeted that Burns’s experience was “just nonsense” and “maybe this reporter is just bad at small talk.” Also on Twitter, Rebecca Traister of New York claimed that “Fetterman’s comprehension is not at all impaired.” (In a profile of Fetterman, Traister compares voters asking for greater transparency from the Fetterman campaign about his medical records to “right-wing carnival barkers” and Obama birth-certificate conspiracists.) Others downplayed the seriousness of Fetterman’s condition by comparing his need for captioning to wearing glasses or contact lenses.

Disability-rights advocates were granted prime real estate in publications such as the New York Times to criticize Burns, and Buzzfeed went so far as to interview an activist who claimed that Burns’s observations about Fetterman would “worsen attitudes and violence towards disabled people.” The final piling-on came from Fetterman’s wife, who accused Burns of ableism and said, “I don’t know how there were not consequences” for what she reported. “I would love to see an apology towards the disability community from her and from her network for the damage they have caused,” Gisele Fetterman repeated a few days later.

This was all dissembling and deception. The public saw clearly during Fetterman’s only debate with Oz in late October that if anything had been damaged,
it was the reputation of journalists covering for an ailing candidate they clearly wanted to win. It was painful to watch someone visibly struggle to answer questions in a live format. Fetterman began by wishing the audience a good night, and in the course of the debate consistently sounded confused and halting, notably when he was asked about fracking. He has long opposed the technology. But his response—"I do support fracking. And, I don't—l support fracking, and I stand, and I do support fracking"—made it impossible for anyone to make sense out of his position.

And yet, even after Fetterman’s discomfiting performance, mainstream outlets continued to churn out pieces attacking anyone who might dare to take note of Fetterman’s challenges. USA Today ran a piece claiming it was “bigotry” and “bullying” to point out Fetterman’s language stumbles. Multiple outlets again accused critics of engaging in “ableism” for asking questions about his condition. Story after story cited Fetterman’s many verbal gaffes as a “teachable moment” for the nation regarding disabilities.

It is the media that need the teachable moment, however, since it has demonstrated a highly selective memory about how these supposed rules for tolerance are applied. The “standard” is that one must accept uncritically the health claims of Democrats, lest one be labeled “ableist,” while continuing to demand full transparency from Republicans. When Tammy Duckworth ran for U.S. Senate in Illinois in 2016 against incumbent Mark Kirk, who had suffered a stroke while in office, the Chicago Tribune’s endorsement of her specifically cited the limitations Kirk’s medical condition posed for his ability to serve—even though Kirk had taken time off to recover and had been far more forthcoming with voters about his condition than Fetterman has been about his.

Further double standards can be seen in matters related to personal responsibility for one’s health. In 2016, the Washington Post published an article with the sideshow-esque title, “Just How Big Is Trump? We asked 5 experts to—you guessed it!—weigh in.” The five “experts,” one of whom was, in fact, a former “carnival guesser” of weight, proceeded to fat-shame Donald Trump and his “unhealthy complexion, puffy, pasty skin,” noting that he was also “sweating a lot.”

By contrast, few news outlets have remarked on the fact that Fetterman, who had been diagnosed with atrial fibrillation and decreased heart function in 2017 (a fact his campaign revealed only after his stroke), had not visited a doctor in five years and not taken the medications prescribed for his condition—factors that might have contributed to his stroke and that certainly bear on rational assessments of his overall judgment.

As for the charge of “ableism,” the National Center on Disability and Journalism advises reporters to “emphasize abilities, not limitations,” when reporting on people with disabilities.

However, asking questions about a candidate’s limitations as well his strengths is part of the mission of an independent press, and it allows voters to get a full picture of those vying for power.

It is not “ableist” to question whether Fetterman’s aphasia and communication challenges might affect his ability to serve. As a neurologist noted in the Wall Street Journal: “If voters can’t understand what a candidate is saying, can they trust he’ll effectively represent them? If the candidate can’t make his thoughts coherent, can he work effectively with colleagues?”

If Pennsylvania voters believe he can, and Fetterman wins, there is still the question of how his campaign handled the truth of his medical condition. No one wants Fetterman to end up a Keystone State version of Woodrow Wilson—another progressive who suffered a series of strokes, including a seriously disabling one in 1919 while president. His wife, Edith, colluded with his physician to keep his condition secret, even from his own cabinet. And like Fetterman’s wife, Gisele, Edith Wilson blamed others for the challenges posed by her husband’s poor health, claiming Republicans had caused Wilson’s stroke by opposing the League of Nations. Edith also took over many of the functions of the chief executive during Wilson’s convalescence, including signing papers with his signature (Wilson was unable to speak or move at the time).

Edith Wilson would have loved today’s media, which would eagerly have covered for her husband. The disturbing swiftness with which narratives are now established, and the vehemence with which anyone—voters or fellow journalists—is denounced if he fails to go along, will only further erode trust in the profession. As Leighton Woodhouse noted in a sharp essay in Tablet about the ginned-up controversy over Burns, Twitter became “the means by which the partisan and ideological vanguardists huddled inside the media’s fortress walls could find their ragtag armies on the outside and wage war together against disfavored colleagues.”

Questioning the lack of transparency from a candidate who has suffered a serious medical event does not make you a conspiracy theorist, and noticing a candidate’s physical limitations does not make you a bigot. For journalists, asking such questions is one of the requirements of their job. Dasha Burns did it and reaped the whirlwind from propagandists posing as journalists. She is the real deal. Her indignant critics are the ones who deserve to be shamed. #
IF THERE WAS a moment that captured what became known as the mahapach—the political upheaval that marked the rise of the longtime back bencher Menachem Begin to the prime ministership of Israel in 1977—it was a private one in Begin's office, one witnessed by Begin's friend Hart Hasten. Following an election in which he had emerged victorious, Begin was engaged in assembling a governing coalition when the members of a Haredi party burst into his office, upset over a matter pertaining to the political horse-trading. Begin sat silently as they expressed their agitation, and then he calmly responded in Yiddish: "Rabbosai, hobn ihr shoin gedavent minha" (Gentlemen, have you already prayed the afternoon service)? Stunned by the unexpected query, the Orthodox men paused and then replied that they had, in fact, not yet engaged in this obligatory ritual. So, at Begin's urging, a minyan, or prayer quorum of 10, was formed in his own office, featuring Begin, Hasten, the Orthodox Knesset members, and Begin's chief of staff, Yehiel Kadishai. By the time the service had concluded, tempers had subsided, and, bound by a shared reverence for a millennia-old faith, Begin and his future coalition members resumed negotiations with equanimity.

It's worth keeping this story in mind as we analyze the recent elections in Israel and the decades-long trends that have produced the country's 37th government. Every aspect of the scene in Begin's office would have come as a profound shock to David Ben-Gurion, the man who oversaw Israel's birth. For Ben-Gurion, Begin was a figure whose right-wing minority party deserved no recognition; the worldview that Begin had imbibed from his mentor Ze'ev Jabotinsky represented, in Ben-Gurion's estimation, an element of Zionism's past, not its future. And despite the fact that Begin was the leader of the opposition, Ben-Gurion never called him by his name, referring to him instead only as “the man sitting next to Member of Knesset Bader.” Ben-Gurion even refused to facilitate the moving of Jabotinsky's body to Israel for reburial (the great Revisionist leader had died in New York in 1940). Begin was forced to wait until 1964 and the premiership of Levi Eshkol to secure Jabotinsky's reinterment in the Holy Land.

Ben-Gurion would certainly be surprised, to say the least, to learn that in 2022, Jabotinsky's movement would make Likud, the party of Jabotinsky's heir, the largest party in Israel—while Labor, the heir to his own socialist party, would only barely make it into the Knesset.

The same surprise would have been experienced by Ben-Gurion at the role religion would play in Israeli politics and society. While prayer came naturally for Begin, Ben-Gurion would not have asked to join a minyan for minha; prayer, he reflected once in a letter now in Israel's Library Archives, “may feel pleasant—yet it is not reality, but self-deception.” Ben-Gurion seems to have assumed that with the creation of a polity for Jews, the traditions maintained through the generations of the Diaspora would fade.

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The minyan organized by Begin highlighted how he had overthrown the grip of Ben-Gurion's political successors on Israeli public life: by emphasizing his support for the Jewish character of Israel's civic character, by refusing to jettison public reverence for the faith of centuries, and by forging a coalition between Orthodox political parties and a base of traditionally minded Sephardic Jews who had long been taken for granted by the secular Ashkenazi elites.

It further bears mentioning that Begin did not inherit this comfort with religion from his mentor. Unlike Begin, who grew up in the famous Jewish community known as Brisk (now Brest, in Belarus), Jabotinsky was raised in cosmopolitan Odessa. Prayer was as foreign to the father of right-wing “revisionist” Zionism as it was to the socialist Ben-Gurion, or perhaps even more so; while Ben-Gurion had, in his youth, experienced traditional Jewish rituals, it was only just before his death at the age of 59 that Jabotinsky first learned the Kol Nidre, perhaps the most famous piece of Jewish liturgy. In a rare exchange with Ben-Gurion, Jabotinsky described his desire for a Jewish state, in a letter that lacked any reverence for traditional Jewish customs:

I can vouch for there being a type of Zionist who doesn’t care what kind of society our “state” will have; I’m that person. If I were to know that the only way to a state was via socialism, or even that this would hasten it by a generation, I’d welcome it. More than that: Give me a religiously Orthodox state in which I would be forced to eat gefilte fish all day long (but only if there were no other way) and I’ll take it.

While Jabotinsky’s own appreciation of civic religion may have grown over time, there was no guarantee that the nascent Israeli right in 1948 would have been sympathetic to the Jewish state being a place that cherished traditional Jewish faith. It was Begin who, as prime minister three decades after the founding, first demanded kosher food when making state visits abroad; and it was Begin who, as prime minister, first insisted that Israel’s airline not fly on the Sabbath. He argued, as Yehuda Avner recounts in The Prime Ministers, that “one need not be pious to accept the cherished principle of Shabbat. One merely needs to be a proud Jew.” It was Begin, in other words, who understood the role religious tradition would play in the Israeli future.

This understanding has been vindicated. Much has been written on the various and very different views of the members of Israel’s newest government. But less focus has been given to the remarkable fact that this seems to be the first Israeli coalition with a majority made up of Orthodox Jews. This includes not only the members of the religious parties themselves but also those MKs from the Likud who are part of the Orthodox community. And this is an accurate representation of what the country has become. As Maayan Hoffman noted in an article titled “Why the Israeli Election Results Should Not Be Surprising,” the makeup of the future Knesset reflects plain sociology: “Around 80% of Israel’s population is either traditional, Religious Zionist or ultra-Orthodox, according to official reports.”

Begin was a singular figure in Israel’s history—one who seamlessly joined deep familiarity with, and knowledge of, Jewish tradition, a personal, natural faith in the God of Israel, and a Zionism that defended both Western democratic traditions and the Jewish right to the Land of Israel. But there is no question that Israeli society today reflects the fact that only Begin among the nation’s founders sensed what the future of Israel would be.

No one, under the new government, will be forced to eat gefilte fish. But all future successful political leaders will have to understand and address the central role that traditionally religious Israelis are now playing in the country’s polity. In the ministerial offices of Israel’s 37th government—and its 47th, and its 57th—there will be many more minyanim yet to come.

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ON OCTOBER 26, Elon Musk strode into Twitter’s San Francisco headquarters carrying a heavy white porcelain object. The media described it as a “kitchen sink” and mused about various “everything but the...” implications. Musk himself tweeted a short video of his grand entrance, commenting, “Let that sink in!” But even a glance at the ceramic signifier showed it wasn’t a kitchen sink at all, but rather a washbasin of the sort one would find in a typical powder room. A bathroom vanity.

Perhaps that’s a signifier as well. “Vanity” isn’t a bad watchword for Musk’s Twitter adventure. In one sense, it could be a reference to the entrepreneur’s abundant self-regard. Or it might be seen as a nod to the existential futility of every human endeavor. (Cue Ecclesiastes.) Either way, the stakes could not be higher.

Musk’s $44 billion acquisition was the largest leveraged buyout of a tech company in history, the New York Times reports. Musk himself admits he overpaid. For those who dozed through their Mergers & Acquisitions class, “leveraged” means he didn’t pay the full purchase price himself. Yes, he put up a fortune, but he also loaded $13 billion in debt onto a company that has been only sporadically profitable. Twitter will have to slash costs and supercharge revenue if it hopes to keep up with the debt payments. Meanwhile, the economy is shaky, interest rates are soaring, and tech-industry advertising revenues are starting to tank. Not great timing for a deal like this.

A former Tesla engineer told me these sorts of high-stakes gambles are familiar to people who work with Musk. “He likes to set almost impossible challenges for himself and his companies,” he said. “And then he’ll overpromise in his public statements. But I think he really believes those things when he says them.” Musk has overpromised about so many things—development milestones for SpaceX rockets, how soon Teslas will fully drive themselves—that his predictions have become an industry joke. But Musk has also accomplished so much more than any other living entrepreneur that I find it hard to fault him for being a bit excitable. Still, his Twitter acquisition looks like the biggest, riskiest reach of his career.

Musk’s fortune and reputation aren’t the only things at stake. There’s also, you know, the future of America. In a May TED talk, Musk said he wasn’t buying Twitter to make money but to provide an “inclusive arena for free speech.” That sounds like more Muskian hype, but I believe he is sincere. “My strong intuitive sense is that having a public platform that is maximally trusted and broadly inclusive is extremely important to the future of civilization,” he went on. “I don’t care about the economics at all.” OK, but we live in a country that still has a First Amendment. Does it really matter that much whether Twitter favors woke speech police on one side or extremist carnival barkers.
on the other? After all, most Americans rarely even look at Twitter. And of those who are on the platform, only a small percentage are deeply engaged.

I think it does matter. The audience isn’t massive, but Twitter is the virtual hangout spot for elites in media and policymaking. These people aren’t just chatting; they’re organizing. In a column on Bari Weiss’s Common Sense Substack, Walter Kirn writes about covering the 2012 Democratic Convention, back in the early days of Twitter. During a speech by Michelle Obama, Kirn sat in a row with some of the country’s top political reporters. He watched as they all logged in to Twitter to monitor the comments—and make their own—as Obama spoke. “Within minutes, a consensus formed that the speech was a triumph,” he writes. He realized that night that Twitter “had become an opinion sculpting instrument, an oracle of the establishment.”

Of course, conservatives and disaffected moderates have also used Twitter to reach bigger audiences and to challenge entrenched orthodoxies. If Twitter were a truly level playing field, that would be great—a thousand flowers blooming and all that. But it has never been a level playing field, especially not since Trump’s election in 2016. Twitter’s moderators and algorithm jockeys have increasingly embraced the notion that conservative viewpoints aren’t just wrong, they’re “misinformation.” So, over time, Twitter has evolved from a platform designed for the maximal exchange of ideas to one more concerned about protecting the public from ideological contagion.

The problem isn’t that conservatives are shouted down by louder or smarter voices. It’s that the digital elite decides which issues are even fit to be discussed. Hunter Biden’s laptop, the possible Wuhan lab leak, worries about “gender affirming” medical interventions for kids—Twitter diligently suppressed these topics, sometimes through subtle “shadow bans,” sometimes with an almost Soviet brazenness. (Remember when the New York Post’s whole account got locked over the laptop story? During a presidential election?) This kind of power makes Twitter a force multiplier in the war of ideas.

So, while Twitter might not be the biggest social-media platform, it sets the agenda for other tech companies and the media. If woke extremists throw a tantrum on Twitter, you can be sure Facebook, too, will start demoting posts on the suddenly verboten topic. And it’s not just social media. Amazon has dropped books questioning transgender orthodoxy, and Pay Pal routinely closes the accounts of users who transgress vague ideological redlines. This new censoriousness is pervading all our elite institutions. We can’t expect Musk to change it single-handedly. But if he can bring a more open spirit to discussions on Twitter, it would be a breakthrough for free speech. Who knows, it might even become contagious.

So what are the chances Musk can make any of this work? In a column published not long after Musk announced his plan to buy the platform, I wrote: “I have to admit, I have…qualms.” Reader, I still have…qualms. If anything, my qualms have grown. First, let’s get something straight: Elon Musk is unquestionably the single greatest entrepreneur of our time. He’s the first person to have launched a major car company successfully in, oh, a century or so. And his company SpaceX revolutionized the rocket business—and saved NASA’s manned space program in the process. He has been on the precipice of failure many times and always come through stronger. Musk is famous for his tolerance for risk. But sometimes he creates risks through his own unruly behavior. “He’s unfiltered,” the Tesla engineer told me. “You could say he’s immature at times.”

The manic energy Musk brings to his enterprises—his constantly shifting focus, his runaway enthusiasms—all that can be problematic for an entrepreneur trying to steer multiple businesses through rocky political shoals. (“The bird is freed,” Musk tweeted when his deal closed. “In Europe, the bird will fly by our rules,” an EU official in charge of tech policy snapped back.) Musk likes to wade into issues he doesn’t know much about. His suggestions about how to end the war in Ukraine, for example, were less than helpful. And he just can’t help being a bit of a troll. Shortly after taking over the company, he tweeted, then deleted, a link to a nasty theory about what really happened in the (admittedly, very weird) Paul Pelosi attack. When the New
York Times slammed him for sharing a “Link From Site Known to Publish False News,” Musk tweeted back, “This is fake—I did *not* tweet out a link to the New York Times!”

OK, that’s pretty funny. But is it wise to be tweaking politicians and journalists like some guest on Greg Gutfeld’s show? Twitter might need to allow more controversy on its platform. But too much controversy stirred up by the CEO is bad for business. Already, General Mills, Volkswagen, General Motors, and other companies have announced they are “pausing” their advertising on the platform until things settle down. Does anyone think they would have done this if the new owner’s name was, say, Jeff Bezos or Laurene Jobs?

At the same time, Musk’s manic energy could be good for Twitter. Longtime Twitter users, including me, feel that the service has been getting worse for years. For me, Twitter’s biggest strength is in helping me discover new expert voices in fields such as energy, or the war in Ukraine. But Twitter seems more interested in telling me whom not to listen to. The “What’s happening” bar on the home page is full of progressive claptrap: why Daniel Radcliffe “spoke out against J.K. Rowling’s anti-trans beliefs,” or “fact checkers say” that this or that opinion is wrong. Musk seems like just the guy to shake the place up and put more trust in the users.

He certainly has no shortage of ideas. In recent weeks, Musk has floated all sorts of possibilities. Twitter could offer longer video clips. It could become a paid service, at least for users who want the coveted blue check that means their identity has been confirmed. For Twitter users, it has been interesting to see Musk thinking out loud. Sometimes users will throw out their own suggestions and he’ll respond. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a leading business figure interact so directly with customers about how a company should operate.

But thinking out loud has its limits. Musk often muses about his plans in ways that seem almost deliberately insulting to the company’s current employees. At one point, he casually told investors that he might need to lay off 75 percent of the staff. Soon after the deal was completed, he followed through, offering pink slips to 3,700 workers, about half the company’s total workforce. I don’t doubt that the company was overstaffed. But by firing half the staff in one fell swoop, Musk risks losing crucial institutional knowledge while simultaneously alienating the employees he wants to keep. He needs the employees who remain to buy into his vision. That process takes both empathy and time. Musk has never been known for empathy. As for time, well, he has several other companies to run. As Megan McArdle notes, “it’s hard enough to gut-rehab a corporate workforce and culture with a leader who is tirelessly dedicated to the task full time.”

What could go wrong? Plenty. A social-media platform is like an ecosystem; it exists in a kind of balance that can be easily disrupted. Twitter was both heavy-handed and shamelessly biased in its moderation of abusive or inappropriate comments. But that doesn’t mean the platform can just roll back moderation to the bare minimum. Other social-media platforms have learned the hard way that when moderation fails, jerks, wackos, and spammers take over. Almost no one, especially advertisers, wants to be part of a community like that. According to several reports, Musk has cut his moderation team down to a “skeleton crew.” Will they be able to keep up with the wave of abuse and misuse coming their way? Already we see signs that ideological troublemakers are posting the ugliest material possible. They’re trying to prove that Musk’s Twitter will be the fascist hellhole critics predict. And the Washington Post and others are happy to blame it all on Musk.

If the site plunges into messy disarray—with users and advertisers fleeing—it might be impossible to restore its former vitality. And making good on those debt payments might become an insuperable challenge. But Musk is right: The world really needs “an inclusive arena for free speech.” Until now, Twitter has amplified the voices of a censorious, woke elite and suppressed a range of more diverse voices. Musk is gambling that there is a much bigger audience of people who don’t want to be protected from dangerous ideas. They just want to be trusted to make up their own minds. If he’s right about that, and I hope he is, Musk just might pull this out. He’s done it before.
FOR THE LAST half century, Americans have told themselves a pleasant story about the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It goes like this: Yes, there were abuses during the long tenure of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. But that was decades ago. After painful and revelatory hearings in the 1970s, Congress formed permanent select committees in the House and Senate to scrutinize the bureau and the intelligence community. The Justice Department issued new guidelines for the wiretapping authority that the FBI had arrogated to itself. The Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, or FISA, created a secret court to approve warrants to eavesdrop on American citizens. After the scandals exposed in the 1970s, or so the story goes, the FBI was reformed, reformed itself, and has earned its place as perhaps the most famous

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agency in the federal government and the best-known law-enforcement organization on earth.

A wonderful story. If only it were true. In fact, a half century after Hoover died in office, the FBI is mired in scandal again—and the record shows it has continued to conduct itself in highly questionable ways throughout the decades following Hoover’s passing. And while no director since Hoover has accumulated the power he held and wielded over Washington in his time, the bureau remains a threat to both the civil liberties of its targets and the democratic health of the republic.

Over the past six years in particular, we have learned that FBI officials routinely deceive not only the public but also the institutions designed to protect the public from FBI overreach. Agents lie to supervisors. Supervisors lie to judges. FBI directors mislead Congress. And almost no one is ever punished.

Recent reports from the Justice Department inspector general found that field agents routinely fail to verify the facts they submit to the surveillance court in their warrant applications. Another report found that most FBI officials ignore the prohibition on contact with the media. In September, a Los Angeles judge accused the bureau of misleading the court in a search-warrant application it used to seize the contents of 1,400 safe-deposit boxes at strip-mall bank, many of which belonged to innocent citizens. Earlier in 2022, Congress learned that the lead agents investigating Larry Nasser, the USA Gymnastics doctor who serially abused gymnasts under his care, lied to their superiors about his lack of culpability even though they had evidence of his crimes, which delayed justice for his victims and allowed Nasser to continue his predations. One of the agents was allowed to retire with his full pension.

A month before the 2020 presidential election, the Justice Department and FBI announced the arrest of 13 members of the Michigan-based Wolverine Watchmen, which made it seem that the FBI had disrupted a near-miss kidnapping of Michigan’s governor, Gretchen Whitmer. Except, as Buzzfeed first reported, FBI informants and undercover agents “had a hand in nearly every aspect of the alleged plot, starting with its inception.” In April, the Justice Department lost its first trial, with the jury acquitting two of the plotters and failing to reach a verdict on two others.

Also in the run-up to the 2020 election, the FBI warned Facebook and Twitter that Hunter Biden’s infamous laptop might have been the creation of a Russian disinformation effort, thus echoing a public statement to that effect issued by more than 50 former senior national-security officials and most of the media. Those warnings, recently confirmed on Joe Rogan’s podcast by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, were a major reason why social-media companies took unprecedented steps before the election to throttle the distribution of and censor a New York Post exposé on the laptop.

Here’s the thing: The FBI’s own agents would later confirm the authenticity of emails from that laptop in their own investigation of Hunter Biden and his associates, according to the New York Times.

Senior FBI officials caught lying or violating the rules in recent times have mostly evaded punishment. The ones who signed the fraudulent surveillance warrants relating to former Trump campaign aide Carter Page have paid no legal or reputational price for their actions. Earlier this year, the only FBI official convicted for the deception of the FISA court during Russiagate, a lawyer named Kevin Clinesmith, had his law license restored by the District of Columbia Bar. A senior FBI analyst who was referred for administrative discipline because of the Page warrant, Brian Auten, also managed to play a key role in the Hunter Biden probe in 2020. He threw up roadblocks in the investigation by denigrating accurate information about Biden’s relationship to a state-owned bank in China as Russian disinformation.

The last time the FBI faced a crisis in confidence comparable to the present was before 9/11. The mood was captured in a Time cover from April 28, 1997. It featured a package of stories under the heading: “What’s Wrong with the FBI?” In 1996, the FBI leaked that a security guard named Richard Jewell, who had discovered a backpack filled with pipe bombs at a parking lot at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, was actually a suspect in the bombing he

Can the FBI Be Saved from Itself—And Can We Be Saved from the FBI? : December 2022
foiled. For the next 80 days, the press picked Jewell's life apart based on the anonymous whispers of the FBI and Atlanta police. He was innocent, though he was haunted and dogged by his trial by media. He died a decade later, a broken man of 44.

Two years before his passing, the real bomber confessed.

The FBI's relationship with Congress also took a nosedive around the same time. The bureau was unable to produce some 40,000 pages of documents requested by Congress with regard to the investigation into the 1995 white-militia bombing at the Alfred P. Murrah building in Oklahoma City—leading to wild speculation about what had happened to those papers. To get a sense of the public distrust of the bureau in those years, a 1999 poll found that 61 percent of Americans believed that the bureau's agents had set the Branch Davidian compound ablaze—the home of the cult run by David Koresh—in Waco, Texas, in 1993. That was not the case. But the public's confusion was understandable. Following the standoff, the lead agent at Waco told the press the FBI had used no pyrotechnics that day, when in fact it had.

In a parallel to the present day, the FBI also played a role in investigating the president—and details of the ongoing investigation into Bill Clinton's presidential fundraising and even Hillary Clinton's dealings in Whitewater were routinely leaked. Ongoing FBI investigations fed media scandals. Sound familiar?

The biggest blow to the FBI's reputation was in the one area where Hoover excelled: counterintelligence. The FBI botched the investigation into nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee so badly that the Justice Department had to settle for the Branch Davidian compound ablaze—the home of the cult run by David Koresh—in Waco, Texas, in 1993. That was not the case. But the public's confusion was understandable. Following the standoff, the lead agent at Waco told the press the FBI had used no pyrotechnics that day, when in fact it had.

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In the fourth week of George W. Bush's presidency, the FBI arrested Robert Hanssen, one of its own agents, for spying for the Soviet Union. The damage was staggering. Hanssen had committed his treason undetected for more than 20 years. And yet there had been multiple red flags the FBI ignored. At one point, a crude hacking program was found on Hanssen's computer, which Hanssen explained away to his colleagues as a way to recover the forgotten access code to an office printer. His own brother-in-law, also an FBI agent, once recommended that Hanssen be investigated after he learned from Hanssen's wife that she had found a pile of cash in their dresser. Nothing happened. Hanssen himself was placed in charge of the mole hunt—in other words, he was given the job of finding...himself. To make matters even worse, for years the FBI pursued an innocent CIA officer its agents wrongly believed had been responsible for what they would later learn was Hanssen's espionage.

All of this was the backdrop to a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on “restoring the public's trust in the FBI” on June 20, 2001. Even allies of the FBI could no longer defend its incompetence and dishonesty. Senator Chuck Grassley was blunt and withering in his assessment. “My father taught me the FBI could do no wrong,” he said. But the Iowa Republican no longer believed that. He said the presumption that the FBI “acted with integrity was shaken.” Senator Chuck Schumer offered this: “Sometimes you owe it to a friend to look him in the eye and tell him the hard truth. And that truth is this. The FBI has made mistake after mistake after mistake, and many of us are wondering now if those are random mistakes, or if it’s not something deeper.”

This was as close as the FBI came to receiving the kind of congressional scrutiny that had led to post-Hoover changes. In short order, two phenomena emerged and together they derailed the possibility of any significant reforms. They were 9/11 and Robert Mueller.

IN THE WEEKS and months after September 11, 2001, the FBI was simultaneously blamed and rewarded for the attacks. The bureau was blamed for failing to connect the dots; there was enough raw information in its hands for the FBI to have figured out the plot before it was executed. It was criticized for not sharing the intelligence it had with the CIA (which was also blamed for not sharing what it had with the FBI). As Thomas Kean, the Republican co-chair of the 9/11 Commission, said with exasperation at a 2004 hearing: “This is an agency that just does not work.”
And yet, as an institution, the bureau ended up making out like a bandit. Congress gave the FBI vast new authority to spy on potential terrorists inside America. The Patriot Act allowed the FBI to compel phone companies, banks, and employers to hand over records on a suspect while barring these institutions from publicly acknowledging they were under orders from the FBI. Prohibitions on intelligence-sharing between the FBI and other agencies (the CIA in particular) were lifted. At the same time, technological breakthroughs afforded the U.S. government the ability to collect more communications than at any time in its history. In previous eras, the FBI had to break into office buildings and doctor’s offices to steal files. In the new millennium, the bureau—with the help of the National Security Agency—could hoover up such data from the Internet’s wires.

It was the fallout from the investigation of Zacarias Moussaoui, sometimes known as the “20th hijacker,” that provided them with some of these new powers. FBI agents had arrested him less than a month before 9/11 in Minneapolis. The local agents wanted a surveillance warrant on Moussaoui to examine his computer and communications. But their managers at headquarters determined there was not enough probable cause to apply for the warrant.

From one perspective, the Moussaoui case could have served as a condemnation of FBI incompetency. The judgment that there was insufficient probable cause was just that—a judgment. They still could have taken the matter to a judge; the judge could have granted the warrant; and 9/11 may have been prevented.

But that is not the way it was read. Instead, the Moussaoui case became the primary example in the argument that it was time to do away with the so-called “wall” between intelligence and criminal investigations. After 9/11, the wall was agreed to be a luxury America could no longer afford. FBI Special Agent Coleen Rowley, who would later testify before Congress that her investigation into Moussaoui had been stymied by overly cautious managers, wrote in a 2002 letter to Mueller that excessive restrictions on intelligence collection before 9/11 had created a chilling effect when it came to domestic counterterrorism investigations.

Perhaps. But the fact is, the FBI had already figured out how to game the system. In two major counterterrorism investigations before 9/11, FBI agents had obtained warrants for criminal investigations by pretending they were intelligence investigations.

At the time, the bar for getting a warrant in an intelligence investigation from the FISA court was much lower than the one for a criminal investigation, where eventually any application would have to withstand cross-examination in a courtroom.

A 2004 inspector general report explained what happened: “While different agents were assigned to the criminal and intelligence investigations, they were not kept separate from each other. Instead, the criminal agents worked on the intelligence investigation, and the intelligence agents worked on the criminal investigation. This meant that, contrary to what had been represented to the FISA Court, agents working on the criminal investigation had not been restricted from the information obtained in the intelligence investigation.”

The FBI was not just in the habit of deceiving the FISA court. An internal FBI memo from April 21, 2000, found that field agents often ignored limitations in the surveillance warrants themselves. The memo found that agents in one case videotaped a meeting when the FISA warrant had specifically prohibited video recording. In another case, agents continued to intercept an email address after the warrant’s authorization had expired. In a third case, agents kept a wiretap on a cellphone after the phone number had ported to a new customer. As a 2003 report from the Senate Judiciary Committee concluded, those errors had had nothing to do with bureaucratic confusion over the “wall” between intelligence and criminal investigations.

Even though the bureau was under enormous pressure after 9/11 to pursue domestic terrorists with greater urgency, the FISA scandals of 1999 and 2000 could not be ignored. So in response, an FBI agent and

* These deceptions so bothered Judge Royce Lamberth that he barred the supervising agent who made these claims from appearing before the surveillance court, thereafter. Nearly 20 years later, the FISA court would do the same to the supervisory FBI agents who vouched for the warrant applications to spy on Carter Page.
lawyer named Michael Woods developed a new protocol for surveillance warrant applications. The Woods Procedures now required the bureau to verify all facts presented in a FISA warrant application and keep them in a separate file. The Woods file, as it came to be known, was supposed to aid the lawyers and judges reviewing warrant applications to determine whether the assertions were “scrupulously accurate.”

It turns out that the Woods Procedures, like constitutions for Third World police states, sound great on paper and mean nothing in practice. An inspector general audit in 2021 concluded that the FBI was not complying with the Woods Procedures. Out of 7,000 FISA warrants between 2015 and 2020, 179 had missing or incomplete Woods files. In other instances, the actual files had numerous errors. A subsequent review done by the FBI’s own management found that most of the errors were not material to the actual application, meaning they were typos or incorrect dates and spellings. But in what was likely the most serious case of malfeasance, the review of the FISA warrants for Carter Page found that the FBI had conned the surveillance court to such a degree that the court had to revoke two of the warrants. As the inspector general concluded, “the FBI did not faithfully comply with its Woods Procedures or meet its ‘scrupulously accurate’ standard.”

It’s a near miracle that the FBI managed to survive the scandals of 2001. In short order, the agency had been exposed as having employed one of the worst spies in American history and having failed to grasp the details of the 9/11 plot despite having arrested one of the plotters. And on top of that, Congress learned in this same period that the oversight of FBI domestic surveillance was anemic. So how did the bureau manage to rebuild itself and become even more powerful?

The answer is Robert Mueller. The Hanssen case alone proved such a humiliation that Director Louis Freeh resigned abruptly on June 1, 2001, with more than two years left to complete his 10-year term. He told no one of his decision until he announced it. That gave the Bush administration and Congress a tight window to find a replacement. As a result, Mueller did not officially start his job as the new FBI director until right before 9/11. You can’t blame the new boss for the failures of the last one.

Under Mueller’s leadership, the FBI expanded its surveillance of Americans, since it had been tasked with preventing acts of mass terrorism. In fairness, Mueller succeeded in a sense. There has not been another 9/11 since 9/11. But the cost of this security was to make domestic surveillance more routine than it should have been—and to lead the FBI into areas in which they seemed to be incepting terrorist plots themselves to root out Americans attracted by the prospect. Outside analysis of U.S. domestic counterterrorism prosecutions since 9/11 has found that half of the cases brought by the Justice Department relied on informants and FBI assets.

Because the wall between intelligence and criminal investigations had been demolished, the FBI now had the authority to deploy informants at the earliest stage of an investigation, before there had been any indication that there was any kind of plot to prevent.

Reasonable people can disagree over whether these tactics are defensible during a national emergency like the first years after 9/11. Having the FBI lurking in many online chat rooms and Islamic bookstores may have deterred acts of terror. But it’s been more than 20 years now that the FBI has surveilled and penetrated the Muslim American community. And as the recent cosplay kidnapping plot against Governor Whitmer shows, these tactics are now used against right-wing extremists. Is this the new normal for the FBI’s counterterrorism mission, or will we look back at Mueller’s transformation of the bureau the way we cringe at the memory of Hoover’s COINTELPRO operations in the 1960s and 1970s?

During Mueller's first four years in office, an ambitious prosecutor named James Comey was the No. 2 at the Justice Department. They became friends and allies in 2004. That's when they concluded that elements of a National Security Agency program, known as Stellar Wind, lacked an adequate legal basis. The NSA was collecting and storing the digital data of millions of Americans, and the entire process was done without any oversight from the surveillance court created by FISA.

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Everything came to a head on March 10, 2004. Attorney General John Ashcroft was recovering from pancreatitis in a hospital, and White House counsel Alberto Gonzales and chief of staff Andrew Card came to Ashcroft’s bed. They needed his signature on an order certifying the legality of the surveillance program, which the president had to reauthorize every 45 days.

Ashcroft not only agreed with Comey; he had already empowered his deputy to be the acting attorney general. Comey had already informed the White House he would not be certifying the program. Nonetheless, Card and Gonzales made their melodramatic move and asked for Ashcroft’s sickbed signature. Ashcroft rebuffed them, and pointed to Comey, whose supposed defiance of the White House turned him into a hero for many Democrats who loved the idea of anyone “standing up” to the Bush White House.

Comey and Mueller won the day. But this proved a pyrrhic victory for Comey worshippers who falsely believed he was some kind of tribune for civil liberties. (One of them was a soon-to-be senator named Barack Obama.) The eventual compromise struck in the wake of the Ashcroft hospital scene was that the FISA court would oversee Stellar Wind. It did. In 2013, NSA contractor Edward Snowden leaked general FISA warrants that had been used to collect all customer telephone metadata from Verizon.

That same year, Obama nominated Comey to be his FBI director. Comey lasted four years, and he will be remembered for overseeing a bureau that systematically ignored the basic safeguards created to ensure the integrity of the FISA process. Not only that; a team of agents handpicked by Comey’s deputy knowingly conned the FISA court so they could go on a fishing expedition and eavesdrop on Carter Page, an adviser to Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign. In other words, the man who was supposedly responsible for bringing the NSA’s mass surveillance in line with the FISA process ended up exposing that process as a toothless ritual, a sham.

Why should we be so concerned with FISA courts anyway? For the answer to that question, we must travel back to 1975—just after Watergate and during the first year of the Church Committee hearings in the Senate that exposed the bureau’s dirtiest secrets, along with those of the NSA and the CIA. American trust in government in general and the FBI in particular was at a nadir.

In Enemies, a history of the bureau, Tim Weiner tells this story about President Gerald Ford’s attorney general, Edward Levi. An agent named Paul Daly asked for Levi’s signature to install a wiretap without a court order. Levi asked Daly for some time to consider the request, because, Levi said, “the agents might get caught going in.” Daly responded that the secret microphone had already been installed.

This was how Levi learned that the FBI felt entirely free to break into an American citizen’s home or office without approval from a court or even the Justice Department. He was furious. The official story the FBI had been telling the public and the Justice Department was that most of the domestic espionage operations, known then as “black bag jobs,” had been forbidden by Hoover at the end of 1966.

For decades, the bureau had made an interesting and corrupt distinction between intelligence gathering and criminal investigations. If the fruits of a break-in or a wiretap were never to be presented as evidence in a court, then the Justice Department allowed the FBI to wiretap people. This resulted in extraordinary and historic abuses of power. Hoover himself infamously once hosted a meeting with leading female reporters in Washington to share the fruits of the FBI’s surveillance of Martin Luther King, namely, his adulterous affairs. Even so, by the mid-1960s Hoover saw the writing on the wall; he then sought to bring the FBI’s domestic spying in line with court dictates.

Many of his underlings did not. In October 1972, five months after Hoover died in office, acting director Patrick Gray ordered break-ins against Palestinian-American groups across the country—and the next month, black-bag jobs against the friends and families of 26 Weather Underground fugitives. These decisions eventually led to the first and only Justice Department indictments of senior FBI officials: Gray deputies Mark Felt and Edward Miller.

Felt later went on CBS’s Face the Nation and defended his decision to order the break-ins against the Weather Underground, saying that someone needed to take responsibility for keeping the country safe and that
sometimes the rights of a few must be violated to secure the rights of many. Felt was giving voice to a thorny dilemma. On the one hand, some American citizens were plotting terror without a connection to a foreign power, and the only way to find out about their activities and prevent them from going ahead was to use wiretaps. On the other hand, the power to spy on American citizens without a court warrant had been abused time and again by the FBI.

Writing in this magazine in June 1978, James Q. Wilson explained the dilemma as follows: “Terrorism and espionage are ominous facts of life, drawing equally on ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign’ persons with little regard for the niceties of citizenship. Just as there has been a ‘clear and present danger’ test by which to judge the scope of the First Amendment’s guarantee of free speech, there may also have to be such a test in judging the Fourth Amendment’s prohibition against unreasonable searches. It ought to be possible for Congress to devise such a test and create independent machinery to apply it without having to defend the increasingly dubious proposition that foreign agents are of necessity more dangerous than domestic terrorists.”

Two months after Wilson’s article appeared, Congress created the FISA court system. Henceforth, if the FBI wanted to spy on an American it suspected of terrorism or espionage, it had to get a secret court to approve the warrant. But it turned out it was shockingly easy to turn the court into a rubber stamp.

MARK FELT IS TODAY best known as Deep Throat, the Washington Post’s long-secret source for Watergate. The conventional view is that Felt’s leaks during Watergate were heroic because he was exposing a greater evil: a sitting president who hired former spooks and G-men to spy on his political opposition. Now, there is no defending Nixon’s skull-duggery or the decisions that led to his demise. But it’s also constitutionally perilous as a precedent to have senior bureaucrats in the FBI believing it is right and proper for them to use their access to state secrets to wage a political war against an elected president.

Here it’s worth comparing Felt with Comey. When Comey leaked his own notes of private conversations with President Donald Trump to a law-professor friend, who in turn passed them on to the New York Times, he believed he was updating the Felt playbook for the late 2010s.

But there was a difference. Felt’s leaks advanced the truth by undermining the false denials of Nixon’s White House—and even though not every detail Felt shared and confirmed about the FBI’s investigation into Watergate was accurate, most of it was.

Not so with Comey’s leaks, which were deeply misleading. For example, the notes made it appear that Trump was trying to interfere in an ongoing investigation into Mike Flynn, his former national-security adviser. As I detailed in the June 2020 issue of Commentary, at the time of Comey’s conversation with Trump, the lead agents investigating Flynn had already recommended closing the investigation altogether. After FBI agents interviewed Flynn weeks before the Trump-Comey conversation, they had briefed the Justice Department with their conclusion that Flynn had not knowingly lied in their conversation with him and that there was no evidence that he was a Russian asset.

What makes Comey’s leaks more sinister than Felt’s is that Comey was peddling misinformation, partial facts that weave a false narrative. He sought to create the public impression that the bureau had accumulated significant evidence that Trump and his top advisers were compromised by Russia. But in point of fact, his own investigators were finding no corroborating evidence for this scenario other than the opposition-research document—the Steele dossier—that had been compiled by Trump’s 2016 opponent. Felt’s leaks corrected the misleading denials from a White House that was trying to shut down the FBI’s investigation into Watergate. Comey’s leaks advanced an untruth.

Leaks have been part of the FBI’s playbook for managing its public image since Hoover took over the bureau in 1924. He worked with journalists as well as Hollywood to make sure the FBI was portrayed as an agency staffed by nonpartisan patriots. Hoover’s second-in-command, Clyde Tolson, even vetted the actors for the 1960s ABC television series FBI to make sure no one on the show had a criminal background or was a member of the Communist Party. Hoover would
recommend changes to scripts.

Sometimes, the FBI’s narrative management was more sinister. When an FBI informant in the Ku Klux Klan was involved in the murder of a white civil-rights worker named Viola Liuzzo in 1965, Hoover and his underlings spread the rumor that Liuzzo had been a member of the Communist Party and a heroin addict, and had abandoned her children to have sex with African-American men.

Hoover famously employed a team of ghost writers—known informally as the “correspondence unit”—to send letters to friendly journalists, occasionally sharing gossip and tidbits, giving the impression that the scribes were part of Hoover’s inner circle. The greatest public-relations coup for the correspondence unit involved one of the founders of the American Civil Liberties Union, Morris Ernst. In 1950, when the FBI was routinely bugging the homes and offices of suspects it was investigating without a warrant, Hoover’s ghostwriters persuaded Ernst to write an essay for Reader’s Digest, the largest-circulation magazine in America, titled “Why I No Longer Fear the FBI.” Ernst wrote: “Those who feared the bureau—as I once did—will be glad to know the facts. The FBI is unique in the history of national police. It has a magnificent record of respect for individual freedom. It invites documented complaints against its agents. It has zealously tried to prevent itself from violating the democratic process.”

Ernst’s assurances sound like a punch line today. This is the same FBI that spied on Martin Luther King, uncovered his adultery, and then, in a poison-pen letter, threatened to expose it if he didn’t kill himself. This is the same FBI that routinely broke into offices and private homes before getting permission to turn on a wiretap from the Justice Department. How could a civil libertarian allow himself to be played like that?

And yet, history tends to rhyme. While the FBI today doesn’t have the ACLU writing defenses of its respect for civil liberties, it does have plenty of water carriers in the liberal media. They are the former FBI and Justice Department officials who have become a ubiquitous presence on cable news and social media.

Just to choose one out of hundreds of examples, consider Asha Rangappa’s essay for the website Just Security from March 6, 2017, titled “It Ain’t Easy Getting a FISA Warrant: I Was an FBI Agent and Should Know.” Rangappa is a former FBI counterintelligence agent, a senior lecturer at Yale, and a reliable defender of the FBI’s leadership. In the essay, she explains that there are so many layers of oversight before a surveillance warrant is even submitted to the FISA court that it’s understandable the court has approved nearly all of them in recent years. But we know now authoritatively that the FISA process was not rigorous at all, thanks to the investigative work of the Justice Department’s inspector general, Michael Horowitz. But we didn’t get the first of Horowitz’s scathing reports on FISA abuse until the end of 2019. For most of the Trump years, the conventional wisdom among journalists, members of Congress, and the broader legal community was that FISA warrants went through what Rangappa called in her piece “extreme vetting.”

The typical way that officials shape the narrative about their bureaucracy is of course through the time-honored practice of leaking. It happens all the time in Washington and nearly everyone does it, including the FBI. But FBI leaking is different from, say, leaks from a powerful senator or the Department of Energy. To begin with, the FBI is the one institution in government that is supposed to investigate leaks of classified information. This gives the Bureau extraordinary power over other parts of the national-security state. This means that every now and again, powerful generals such as David Petraeus or James Cartwright will be pursued by the bureau’s anti-leak team. But FBI leakers are themselves almost never punished.

Case in point: Even after the Justice Department’s inspector general caught former FBI deputy director Andrew McCabe lying about his own efforts to soften stories about the bureau’s decision not to investigate the Clinton Foundation before the 2016 election, he still got his pension restored and is now into his fourth year in a second career as a CNN analyst. In 2021 the inspector general concluded that in 2016 there was “a cultural attitude at the FBI that was far too permissive of unauthorized media contacts.” Looking at the stream of detailed stories about FBI investigations into Trump and his allies, there is little evidence that the culture of 2016 has changed.
In 1976, as the Church Committee was wrapping up its business, Senator Barry Goldwater, a Republican whose libertarian streak led him to be supportive of the groundbreaking oversight, expressed a fascinating bit of regret. He told an NBC interviewer that he thought the committee went too far in exposing assassination programs of the CIA and had not gone far enough in delving into the wire-tapping of American citizens by the FBI.

Goldwater’s reasoning was that the CIA’s dirtiest deeds were on orders from elected American presidents. The assassinations, coups, and acts of political warfare were part of a nasty cold war, where the adversary was playing even dirtier. The FBI’s abuses, however, went straight to the heart of our constitutional republic. The fact that Hoover could order a powerful domestic intelligence service to put Americans under the microscope because of what they believed was the equivalent of enforcing a regime against a kind of thought crime. Anti-war groups in the 1960s were not agents of foreign powers, nor were the civil-rights leaders of the era. But many of these Americans were treated like domestic enemies without a scintilla of due process.

Goldwater’s point stands today as well. The checks on the FBI’s domestic intelligence operations are anemic. This is because intelligence work and policing undermine each other. The bureau’s intelligence responsibilities led to the creation of a part of the FBI bureaucracy that literally adopted and perfected the tactics of criminals—whether it was the break-ins and buggings of the Hoover era or the hacking of cyber sleuths today.

Police collect evidence with the expectation that it will have to withstand scrutiny in a court of law. Spies sort through rumor and secrets to learn what an adversary is trying to hide from view. With that in mind, it would be better to take the spies out of the national police force. The FBI as it stands should not be an organization that both surveils national-security threats and works on domestic policing. Congress should create a new domestic-intelligence entity similar to the MI5 in the United Kingdom. This way the FBI can focus on solving crimes, while the new agency could focus on preventing acts of terror and rooting out spies.

A second key reform would be to hold senior officials accountable. The last time a senior FBI official was actually indicted was in the late 1970s. Felt and Miller ended up being convicted for violating the rights of associates and members of the Weather Underground in 1980 by a jury, and for their misbehavior they received small fines and no jail time. In 1981, President Reagan pardoned both men, and their reputations were soon rehabilitated. Felt would go on to testify before Congress on domestic security matters and occasionally offer his opinion on television news shows.

If no one is punished for deceiving the FISA court and failing to consistently adhere to the Woods Procedures, then what is the point of having a FISA process at all? Today, the FBI leaders who presided over Russiagate—Comey, McCabe, and Peter Strzok—are feted like resistance heroes, with sinecures at cable news networks, elite universities, and Washington think tanks. What lesson will others draw from this, except that there are no consequences for abusing authority against the right political targets?

Finally, the fourth estate should reconsider the Watergate precedent. More often than not, leaks about ongoing investigations end up serving as an excuse to air damaging allegations about public figures the reporters themselves do not have the goods to back up. That was the story of the Steele dossier, which was shopped to journalists before the 2016 election, but became a story only after a senior official leaked to CNN that the dossier was briefed to Obama and Trump during the presidential transition. The allegations on their own were too thin to publish, but stories about the FBI examining the allegations set off the first of a thousand news cycles.

In 1947, Harry Truman was convinced that Hoover was building a dangerous secret police force in the FBI. He wrote to his wife Bess, “Edgar Hoover would give his right eye to take over and all Congressmen and Senators are afraid of him. I’m not and he knows it. If I can prevent it, there’ll be no NKVD or Gestapo in this country.”

Truman did not stop Hoover. Neither did other presidents who came after him. It took Hoover’s death, Watergate, and the Church Committee to reform the FBI. Fifty years later, many of those reforms have themselves been defanged or twisted beyond recognition. New ones are needed.
Israel’s Partial Victory

The Arab states tiptoed away

By Daniel Pipes

The state of Israel celebrates its 75th birthday in 2023, a year that will also mark a major but generally unnoticed milestone in the Arab–Israeli conflict. During Israel’s first 25 years, from 1948 to 1973, Arab states—with Egypt, Jordan, and Syria in the lead, followed by Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon—fought it five times with conventional armed forces. They built up huge armies, allied with the Soviet bloc, and fought Israel on the literal battlefield. After 1973, the states quietly bowed out and remained out over the next 50 years—which is to say, for twice as long as the era during which they actively fought Israel.

The few exceptions to this cold peace—notably, a Syrian aerial confrontation in 1982 and an Iraqi missile attack in 1991—help make the point. Their brevity, limitations, and failure enforced the wisdom of not confronting Israel. The Syrian air force lost 82 planes, while the Israeli air force lost none. And 18 separate Iraqi missile attacks directly killed one Israeli. The Iraqi and Syrian regimes both started nuclear programs but gave them up after coming under Israeli attacks in 1981 and 2007, respectively.

Although most Arab states continued to assault Israel verbally and economically after 1973, they carefully withdrew from military confrontation. Focused on other issues—the Iranian threat, the Islamist surge, civil wars in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, Turkey going rogue, and a water drought—hoary anti-Zionist taboos lost much of their hold in Arabic-speaking countries.

Six Arab states went on to open full diplomatic relations with Israel: Egypt in 1979, Jordan in 1994, and all of the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan in 2020. (Two other Arab states started in

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this direction but aborted: Lebanon in 1983 and Syria in 2000.) Saudi Arabia is widely expected to follow after the rule of 87-year-old King Salman ends, which would significantly move the Arab center of gravity in favor of accepting Israel.

Changes have occurred in a variety of ways. The Israeli minister of sports broke into tears in 2019 as “Hatikvah,” Israel’s anthem, was played in Abu Dhabi upon the victory of an Israeli athlete. In September 2020 alone, the preacher at Mecca’s Grand Mosque recalled Muhammad’s good relations with Jews, the Arab League turned down a Palestinian-sponsored anti-Israel resolution, and the UAE government “advised” all hotels “to include Kosher food options” in all their dining offerings.

Four Arab foreign ministers attending a meeting hosted by Israel in early 2022 (the Negev Summit) symbolized this new acceptance. More substantively, Israel sold advanced military equipment to the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco totaling more than $3 billion in two years; in 2021, that accounted for 7 percent of $11.3 billion in Israeli global military sales. Obviously, one sells matériel only to governments expected to remain long-term allies.

But as Arab states exited the anti-Zionist arena, a range of other actors stepped in: Palestinians, Islamists, the Iranian and Turkish governments, and leftists. Conventional armed forces—ships, tanks, planes, rockets—nearly disappeared from the battlefield, replaced by other methods of attack: stabbings, weaponized kites, suicide bombings, weapons of mass destruction, and the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement.

Why did this overlooked switch take place, and what are its implications? Some history helps answer these questions.

Arab leaders insisted through their 25 years of confrontation with Israel that they would always persevere. On June 10, 1967, a mere four days after the Six-Day War concluded disastrously for them, for example, Algerian strongman Houari Boumédiène announced, “If we lost one battle, we will not lose the war ... the war must go on ... until right is restored to its proper place, until aggression is destroyed and until what has been imposed by brute force is undone. ... We must not lay down arms.” A day later, he doubled down on this message, talking of “the road to victory, ... continuing the battle regardless of how hard it is or of the price we will have to pay.” Despite such bravado, the states abandoned those arms just six years later.

And for good reason. On the battlefield, the Arab states waged wars against Israel five times (1948–49, 1956, 1967, 1970, and 1973) and lost them all, badly. In particular, the defeats of 1948–49 and 1967 left Arab leaders shocked. Newborn Israel had seemed so vulnerable, while the Six-Day War was the single most lopsided debacle in military history. Add to this the 82–0 aerial wipeout of 1982 and direct confrontation with Israel lost its attraction. The states tiptoed away.

Incendiary anti-Israel rhetoric promised more than the leaders of Arab states could deliver. Early on, they found that arousing and channeling hostility through propaganda against Israel distracted their populations from problems at home, and so served them well. Gamal Abdel Nasser, who ruled Egypt between 1954 and 1970, mastered this art, winning massive approval as he attributed almost any problem to “the Zionists.” By 1973, however, Arab leaders realized that incessant anti-Zionism had created a tiger they could barely ride, so they toned down both the rhetoric and the actions.

A powerful brew of leftist ideologies, including anti-imperialism, Arab socialism, and Third Worldism, characterized Arab politics until roughly the time of Nasser’s demise in 1970. During that period, governments radiated an optimism, however crude and ill-conceived, about their own abilities. Histrionics surrounding the Six-Day War, for example, demonstrated this shrill and foolish self-assurance, with Nasser announcing, “War will be total, and the objective will be to destroy Israel. We feel confident that we can win and are ready now for a war with Israel.”

That reckless optimism eventually subsided, replaced by a bitter sense of realism, sobriety, and limitation. Repeated military failures against Israel fueled this change, as did a wider disappointment. When Arab speakers looked around, they found themselves trapped by repression, inequity, backwardness, and poverty, as symbolized by the much-discussed and very negative Arab Human Development Report 2002. Gloom replaced hope; mordant introspection took the place of exuberant ambition.

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The same was true for economics as difficulties following the oil boom of 1970–80 exacerbated this shift. Massive oil revenues brought stupendous national growth during those heady, exhilarating years. Oil producers led the way, of course, but countries that serviced the producers, such as Egypt and Jordan, also benefited. Lebanon maintained a startlingly high economic standard of living through much of its civil war, from 1975 to 1990. The flood of money brought not just economic muscle and diplomatic power, but a sense that the trauma of modernization had been finessed. Past mistakes appeared swept away as a bright future beckoned. For a few glorious years, it seemed that oil would solve the Arabs’ problems, perhaps even dispatch Israel, which found itself mercilessly squeezed (for example, 25 sub-Saharan African states broke relations with it after the 1973 war).

But binges rarely go unpunished, and the 1970s intoxication led to a 1980s hangover. Just as the boom blessed virtually all the Arab states, so the bust afflicted nearly every one of them, undoing prior gains. The consequences of the oil downturn could be traced with almost graph-like precision in many areas, from the price of Islamic art at London auction houses to African states reestablishing relations with Israel (eventually, 42 of the 44 sub-Saharan African states not members of the Arab League did so). Economics eventually also brought the Arab states closer to Israel. In 2018, then–Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pointed out “a great change” in the Arab world, which has growing connections to Israel because it needs its “technology and innovation, ... water, electricity, medical care, and high-tech.”

Political woes aggravated the sense of defeat. Once renowned for the strength of their dictatorships (think Hafez al-Assad and Saddam Hussein), Arab governments more recently have faced the challenge of controlling their subjects. Substantial parts of Libya, Egypt (the Sinai Peninsula), Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq have become anarchic. Obviously, regimes not fully governing their own territory can hardly play a forceful role beyond their borders.

The rise of Islamists, who emerged soon after the 1973 war and quickly presented the most dangerous domestic opposition in almost every Arab country, exacerbated the states’ weakness. Ideologically dedicated, they directly threatened governments as the distant and benign Israelis never did. From the Hama massacre of 1982 in Syria to the Rabaa massacre in Cairo of 2013, Arab governments gave priority to fiercely suppressing their Islamist foes. Anti-Zionism, it turned out, was a luxury—something to promote when convenient and put aside when not.

And then there was the problem of Iran. As soon as Ayatollah Khomeini took power in 1979, Tehran presented a threat to all the Arab states except its Syrian ally, further making the Palestinian cause an afterthought. The Iraq–Iran war of 1980–88 massively diverted attention from Israel. Subversion then replaced direct war, augmenting the Iranian threat to the point that the mullahs controlled the capitals of four Arab states (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen) and sent drones with impunity to strike at a Saudi oil installation. Anti-Iran alliances with Israel began covertly soon after the Iranian Revolution but became openly acknowledged only with the Abraham Accords.

As Arab states receded, others rushed in—beginning with the Palestinians. They are a more impassioned enemy of Israel due to their greater personal stake in the conflict. Their ancestors spearheaded anti-Zionism before 1948; recall the mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husseini, and the Arab Revolt of 1936–39. They rose to the fore again after 1967 with the crushing of three Arab armed forces in six days. That fiasco encouraged the Palestinians to reassert their primacy in the anti-Zionist struggle, but what acknowledgment they won then was more symbolic than real, as state interests remained paramount. True recognition of Palestinian primacy dates to 1974, when the Arab League (the organization of Arab states) recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as the “sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people” and granted it full membership in the league. The 1993 Oslo Accords confirmed that centrality.

Although lacking the resources of the Arab states, and lacking a respectable economy or military, the Palestinians accomplished more than the states ever did. The many Palestinian wars (1982, 2006, 2008–09, 2012, 2014, 2021) may have been lopsided in
If Arab states felt constrained to observe treaties with Israel, however coldly, Palestinians with near impunity trashed the Oslo Accords and every other agreement.

Israel's favor militarily, but they served the purpose of making Israel look bad. Three Arab armed forces lost to Israel in six days, but the PLO managed to hang on against Israel for 88 days in 1982. Arab states lost the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights to Israel, while the Palestinians convinced Israel to hand Gaza and parts of the West Bank over to them. Western governments and peoples largely shunned the Arab-state assault on Israel but widely ignored the Palestinian attacks on it. If Arab states felt constrained to observe treaties with Israel, however coldly, Palestinians with near impunity trashed the Oslo Accords and every other agreement. Their tenacity not only contrasted with the feckless Arab states, but their success also put the states to shame for their failures.

Islamists opened another front. They emerged soon after 1973 as a powerful and worldwide anti-Israel force. Their vitriol had the greatest influence in Muslim-majority countries, either by pressuring the government (Algeria in the 1990s), taking it over (Egypt under Mohamed Morsi), or destroying it (Syria since 2011). They also effectively spread their anti-Zionist message in the West, especially when they partnered with leftists, with a resulting impact on educational institutions, philanthropies, the media, legal systems, and politicians.

While the shah of Iran had maintained a quiet working relationship with Israel, the Islamic Revolution of 1978–79 turned Iran's government into a fanatic enemy, with anti-Zionism serving as a foundation of regime principles and propaganda. Symbolic of this new orientation, Ayatollah Khomeini granted his first audience with a foreign leader to PLO chieftain Yasir Arafat and instituted an annual Jerusalem Day. Tehran organized and funded many organizations to attack Israel, including Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, while its nuclear program represents the single greatest threat to Israel's security. In turn, Israel has become the world's conscience and potential weapon vis-à-vis Iran's nuclear arsenal.

Turkish–Israeli relations, once a model for Muslim–Jewish cooperation, peaked in the late 1990s. That shifted in 2002 with the election of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), an Islamist organization. While Turkey's reorientation lacked the speed, consistency, and totality of the Iranian precedent, it has proven consequential, with the country becoming an occasional base for operations against Israel, a supporter of Hamas, and a significant anti-Zionist voice internationally. At times, however, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan decides he needs Israel and warms up relations in an evidently transactional manner. Also, trade and tourism have continued through thick and thin.

The global left had an erratic record regarding Israel before 1967, with the Soviet Union playing a crucial role in the country's coming into existence and American liberals viewing it more favorably than conservatives (think Truman vs. Eisenhower). The shift away from Israel began as the left discovered Palestinians and made them its most-favored victim. Leftist antagonism to Israel culminated in 2001 with the United Nations' Durban conference “against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance,” where many strands came together to criticize and ostracize Israel. Since then, the left—from European public opinion to Marxist unions in India to politicians Jeremy Corbyn in Great Britain and Gabriel Boric in Chile—has become increasingly hostile to the Jewish state.

Thus did the Arab–Israeli conflict splinter into the Palestinian–Israeli, Islamist–Israeli, and leftist–Israeli conflicts.

These developments have two main implications for Israel.

First, Israel won a victory over the Arab states, with their far larger populations, resources, economies, and diplomatic heft, a signal accomplishment that deserves far more attention than it has received. In 1994, for example, then–IDF Chief of Staff Ehud Barak argued that “in the foreseeable future, the main threat to the State of Israel is still an all-out attack by conventional armies.” This year, Israeli strategist Efraim Inbar insisted that the “idea that Jewish and Arab states will coexist peacefully...ignores the reality on the ground.” Granted, no Arab state signed a document of surrender or otherwise acknowledged defeat, but defeat was their reality. After going into battle with guns blazing in 1948, expecting easily to snuff out the nascent State of Israel, rulers in Cairo, Amman, Damascus, and elsewhere incrementally realized over a
quarter-century that the scorned Zionists could beat them every time, no matter who initiated the surprise attack, no matter the terrain, no matter the sophistication of weapons, no matter the great-power allies. The fracturing of Arab-state enmity constitutes a tectonic shift in the Arab–Israeli conflict.

That said, lasting victory can take many decades to be confirmed. Russia and the Taliban looked defeated in 1991 and 2001, respectively, but their resurgences in 2022 put these in doubt.* A parallel revival seems unlikely for the Arab states, but the Muslim Brotherhood could again take over Egypt, Jordan's monarchy could fall to radicals, Syria could become whole again, and Lebanon could become a unified state under Hezbollah rule. We can say with confidence that the Arab states have been defeated at least for now.

That defeat raises an obvious question: Does it offer a model for Palestinian defeat?** In part, yes. If states with large Muslim-majority populations can be forced to give up, that refutes a common notion that Islam makes Muslims immune to defeat.

But in larger part, no. First, Israel is a far more remote issue for residents of Arab states than for Palestinians. Egyptians tend to care less about making Jerusalem the capital of Palestine than installing proper sewer systems. Civil war has consumed Syrians since 2011. Second, states compromise more readily than ideological movements because of rulers’ multiple and competing interests. Third, governments being hierarchical structures—and especially the Arabs’ authoritarian regimes—a single individual (such as Anwar al-Sadat or Mohammad bin Salman) can, on his own, radically change policy. No one disposes of such power in the PLO or Hamas. Thus are state conflicts with Israel more tractable and more prone to change than the Palestinian conflict.

Fourth, despite claims about imperialist aggression directed against them, large Arab states never convincingly portrayed themselves as victims of little Israel, something the even littler Palestinians have done with great skill, making themselves the darlings of international organizations and senior common rooms alike, giving them a unique global constituency. Finally, long-ago peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan and the recent Abraham Accords have great importance in themselves but have next to no role in diminishing perfervid Palestinian hostility toward Israel. Likewise, the Palestinians’ groupies—Islamists, Tehran and Ankara, global leftists—completely ignore the accords. If only victimized Palestinians matter, the retreat of Arab states is irrelevant.

For these reasons, Arab states withdrew after just 25 years of leading the charge against Israel, but Palestinians keep going at 50 years.

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* This recalls the famous 1972 remark by China’s Premier Zhou Enlai that it was “too early” to assess the impact of the French Revolution of 1789. In fact, he was referring then to the French student disturbances of 1968, but the misquote expresses a profound truth.

A New Legal Approach to Jew-Hatred

Using anti-Semitic indigeneity arguments against anti-Semites

By Tal Fortgang and Hannah E. Meyers

In September, the organization StopAnti-Semitism released a report announcing what any yarmulke-wearing Ivy Leaguer already knew: Elite universities are rife with white-hot anti-Semitism. Intellectual bastions from Yale to Columbia received failing grades in making Jews feel physically safe, reporting anti-Semitic incidents, and refusing to adopt BDS resolutions.

Campus anti-Semitism usually manifests as a vicious strain of anti-Zionism, as in the recent scandal at Berkeley Law School, where several student affinity groups amended their bylaws in coordinated fashion to prohibit “speakers that have expressed and continued to hold views...in support of Zionism.” With such statements justified in the name of unimpeachable goals, such as “providing a supportive community space for all indigenous people globally,” as the Berkeley Law groups put it, Jewish students are put on the defensive and forced to self-censor or abandon their core beliefs.

Most college-age Jews remain Zionists, however, and consider their Zionism central to their Jewish identity. This means that Jews looking to take on leadership
positions and generally excel at important institutions are increasingly at a disadvantage, as their support for Israel is considered disqualifying. At universities including UCLA, USC, Tufts, and Duke, Jewish students have already faced the stark choice between remaining proudly Zionist and participating in campus life.

This is all the more disturbing because the themes and accusations characteristic of elite anti-Semitism mirror the rantings now frequently hurled at Jews on New York City subways and Brooklyn streets—except with longer words and academic-sounding concepts. The message is the same from self-righteous professors,amped-up student activists, and aggressive vagrants alike: Jews constitute a European entity that usurps indigenous peoples.

This theory can take a few different shapes, but its premise is consistent: Jews, having emerged from Europe as a stateless nation, are white oppressors and occupiers wherever they have since traveled. One frequently hears that the Jews have stolen Israel from the indigenous Palestinians. The domestic version of this canard echoes the classic Marxist trope that Jews exploit honest laborers for profit. Jews, for example, are “greedy landlords,” according to the campaign materials of a onetime New York City Council candidate. Or, by the lights of trendy intersectional analysis, they are willing beneficiaries of white supremacy who reap the profits of minority exploitation. In its extreme Farrakhanite form, the argument maintains that Jews have stolen Judaism itself from “real” non-white Jews.

But anyone now pushing back against either the lowbrow or highbrow versions of this anti-Semitism can use its legal and logical arguments of “indigeneity” against itself.

The message is the same from amped-up student activists and aggressive vagrants alike: Jews constitute a European entity that usurps indigenous peoples.

Because indigeneity is such a flawed concept, it requires a host of double standards and deceits to keep it going. And at this moment, exposing these theories, their implications, and the anti-discrimination laws they likely violate may be the best way to combat the anti-Semitic assault.

The PROGRESSIVE LEFT increasingly values “indigeneity” above all. Progressives in the fields of education, entertainment, and even medicine routinely express the wish that every nation should be returned to its proper place, as if history had never unfolded. Institutions influenced or dominated by progressives now frequently begin their proceedings with “land acknowledgments”—statements about how the words being written or the institutions issuing them sit on lands that were once the stomping grounds of Native Americans. In so doing, they are making a confession of their complicity with the West’s settler-colonialist origins. Colonialism is seen as Europe’s great sin, inextricably tied up with racism, slavery, and, to many, capitalism.

Indigeneity, by contrast, connotes innocence, victimhood, and a cooperative society that would have flourished were it not tainted by European ideas about wealth—all of which amounts to moral currency in the social-justice economy.

Anti-Israel zealots, who were once content to argue that Israel is a legitimate state that exceeded the boundaries of its sovereignty, have fallen in line. Their main thrust is no longer that the putative occupation of the West Bank is unjust. Rather, they now believe and argue that Israel is illegitimate because it is a white European colonialist project that displaced native people of color. And the nub of the argument, logically necessary to every claim that Israel is colonialist or that Jews are white Europeans, is that Jews are not “native” or “indigenous” to the Levant.

Follow the logic. If Ashkenazi Jews who emigrated from Europe to Israel (or the Anglosphere) are colonizers rather than historically indigenous to the region, then they are not real Jews. They are impostors. The favored theory, promoted in part by the novelist Arthur Koestler in his late demented-crackpot phase, is that they are Khazars whose descendants converted at the turn of the second millennium. And they are working out the details of their diabolical thousand-year plan to steal a national narrative so that they can displace brown-skinned natives.

This is historically false in ways even Israel’s critics should understand. Not only are Ashkenazi Jews not Khazars, Israelis aren’t even majority Ashkenazi. Millions of non-European Jews who certainly do not look “white” returned to Israel from Arab lands in the 20th century, and they and their grandchildren and great-grandchildren now make up approximately half of the population. In any case, Ashkenazi Jews can trace their heritage far beyond Poland and the Pale of Settlement, which might explain why Jewish sages in those territories wrote in...
a Semitic language about laws they would fulfill when they returned to Zion.

Even anti-Zionist Jews today would admit that tracing their heritage back to ancient Judea—and before it, to the Davidic dynasty, Sinai, and the Exodus from Egypt—is unquestionably central to their tradition. This is so whether Jews are considered a nation, a religion, an ethnicity, or some combination thereof. It is what unites Ashkenazic, Sephardic, Italian, Ethiopian, and Indian Jews under one banner, making them all Jews rather than disparate groups with similar rituals.

Calling Ashkenazi Jews white colonizers, cutting off their lineage a millennium too soon, therefore strikes at the heart of the Jewish tradition by denying their ability to define themselves. Proponents of this charge are saying that our Jewishness is a false (and malicious) national entity bearing a false claim of shared national-territorial origin under the guise of a false religion. Like the vulgar conspiracy theorist shouting on the street—or the Black Hebrew Israelites who tried to massacre Jewish children in Jersey City in 2019—progressive anti-Semites insist that most Jews are not real Jews, who would be entitled to live in their ancestral homeland. They stole the distinction, and they stole Arab land.

This narrative is also false because it’s built on the idea that a people can be indigenous to a place, when in fact all human beings are ultimately indigenous to the same square of Africa. The relevant question is about the sovereignty a nation exercises over a territory or, in the moral calculus, the centrality of a place to a nation’s constitution. On the realist question of sovereignty, Israel obviously prevails. And on the moral matter, the anti-colonialist effort to deny Israel’s centrality to Jewish national identity is pure anti-Semitic lunacy. Campus activists have ultimately adopted the nutty conspiratorial Jew-hatred of the likes of Louis Farrakhan.

This activist jargon necessarily assumes that Jews are white interlopers, bourgeois capitalists, “eternal wanderers” who colonize and subjugate wherever they go. The activist jargon assumes Jews are white interlopers, bourgeois capitalists, “eternal wanderers” who colonize and subjugate wherever they go. Israel was incepted—ventured a fresh line of attack, literally and figuratively, and Israel’s Western critics followed. The Palestinian justification for bombings in Jerusalem and Netanya was that Israel was occupying territory it had never rightfully acquired. This theory operated on the conceit that if Israel were to give up certain swaths of land under its control, terrorism would cease and a peaceful two-state solution would reign. But there was no connection between territorial concessions and lasting peace because complete rejectionism, with support from left-wing movements in the West, would never die. It would only morph and adapt.

Now, students from Berkeley to NYU wield familiar left-wing jargon to whitewash that same rejectionism and explain why they find violence against Israeli civilians worthy of celebration. If Zionists—substituting the Z-word for the J-word should do the trick—are white European colonialists occupying Arab land, then “movements for Palestinian liberation,” as the Berkeley students put it, are reflections of “anti-racism and anti-settler colonialism.” (For good measure, the law students added that banning Zionists demonstrated student organizations’ “desire for equality and inclusion.”)

This activist jargon necessarily assumes that Jews are white interlopers, bourgeois capitalists, “eternal wanderers” who colonize and subjugate, in mindset if not literally, wherever they go—Israel, America, or anywhere else. And as far as the Levant is concerned, this covers lands from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea and from the Golan Heights down to Eilat.

This premise has become a staple of progressive movements obsessed with identifying oppressor groups and seeking to punish them in the name of equity. American Jews have flourished economically, and the “start-up nation” of Israel has made the desert bloom. These successes actually make both groups

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suspect, if not presumptively guilty, of the crime of settler-colonial capitalism. It is no coincidence that the Black Lives Matter movement tries to draw through lines “from Ferguson to Palestine,” or that Representative Rashida Tlaib claims that it is “the same people that make money and—yes, they do—off of racism, off of these broken policies... From Gaza to Detroit.” This is a timeless form of Jew-hatred: As long as the Jews do not go back “where they came from,” they remain parasites on the natives, exploiting their labor, stealing their resources, and destroying the noble indigenous culture.

But denying the historic Jewish connection to the Land of Israel in this way—denying Jews the right to self-definition and forcibly categorizing them as white Europeans—is discriminatory and likely a violation of civil-rights law. Doing so publicly and repeatedly denigrates a core tenet of a tradition that unifies a group organized around shared heritage. On campuses, especially, it leads to discrimination and harassment. And in the United States, we have laws against that sort of thing.

HERE IS WHERE the concept of indigeneity can be effectively turned on its head by pro-Israel lawyers. It violates American anti-discrimination law by turning Jews into a racial group before subjecting them to systematic disfavor. Discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin, which, the Department of Education has noted, “can include discrimination based on...shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics,” may include telling Ashkenazi Jews that they are “too white” to be the real Jews of the Bible, or to be part of one nation with their Mizrahi or Sephardic brethren.

Some lawyers have expressed skepticism that our current anti-discrimination-law framework can protect Jewish students from the anti-Zionism that they know, but have trouble proving, is anti-Semitic. One challenge has to do with the Department of Education’s interpretations of Title VI. Title VI is the section of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that bans institutions receiving federal funding—which includes nearly every university in America today—from allowing discrimination against any person based on their race, color, or national origin. It is the piece of legislation that authorizes the Department of Education to investigate, monitor, and sue universities for civil-rights infractions. According to the Department of Education, however, it does not explicitly protect individuals on the basis of religion. In this reading, Title VI would cover Jews only if they are being discriminated against on the basis of “race, color, or national origin.” This has been a problem in the past because Jews come in many colors, and from many countries. But religion itself is unnecessary to arguments for the centrality of tracing their lineage to the Holy Land. Even thoroughly secular Jews understand that a common national heritage in the Levant is what unites world Jewry.

It’s what makes Jews one people even if they speak different languages, have different color skin, and observe Judaism with different practices. And so, the concepts and terminology that the anti-Israel left chooses to employ now actually pit anti-Israel zealotry against American anti-discrimination laws.

We counsel an updated application of Natan Sharansky’s famous Three D’s test. “Criticizing” Israeli Jews for being white colonizers does not merely aim to delegitimize Israel; it delegitimizes Jews by severing them from their constitutive national symbols, holy books, and beliefs. It demonizes Jews by casting them as “white occupiers” who exploit non-white people. And it engages in rank double standards against Jews by singling out for scrutiny, among all the nations of the world, their interrelated claims to their ancestral homeland and national unity.

Just imagine the uproar if whites on university campuses told Afro-Caribbean students that they were not really black and could not share the banner with black students from other parts of the world. The victims of such harassment would quickly and rightly have administrators in their corner. The school could lose its federal funding for allowing an out-group to tell an in-group who they are and who they are not, and which national bonds emerging from the mists of time are sufficient to confer unity. Yet that is what happens every time activists deploy the indigeneity canard to demonize Zionism as a colonialist project.

And this is how progressives tantalized by the success of the postcolonialist anti-racist movement in the United States have badly overplayed their hand. They have run headlong into the Civil Rights Act. Lawyers up to the task of defending Israel and
American Jews can and should sue institutions that fail to protect Jews. The lawyers must identify and explain the horrific and patently anti-Semitic implications of calling Ashkenazi Jews “white”—not because there is anything wrong with being white, but because it is maliciously inaccurate—and calling Israel a colonialist state.

When campus activists call Israel “colonialist” or Israelis “white Europeans,” they trace Jewish history back only to Europe. But history is more than a millennium old, and Jews can trace their heritage back much further, all the way to Jerusalem and Beersheba and Yavneh, well before the Romans first renamed Judea “Palestine” to sever the Jewish connection to the land. Referring to Arabs as “indigenous” or “native” similarly rewrites history and the Jewish tradition by erasing the Jewish national and religious connection to the Land of Israel—possibly the most foundational element of Jewishness no matter how abstractly defined.

As elite institutions adopt the trendiest, crassest anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, the Jewish legal defense creates itself. Indigeneity may be a silly value to champion, but if that’s the framework progressives insist on, it will collapse under the weight of its own hypocrisy.
O Ye of Little Faith: The Anti-Semitism of Kanye West

The billionaire star is not just crazy. His Jew-hating politics have a history—and a radical potential.

By Elliot Kaufman

Kanye West is not from the hood. The son of an English professor at Chicago State University, he struggled to be taken seriously as a rapper until he realized that his middle-class background was an asset, not a liability. The gangster rap of the 1980s and '90s, much of it play-acted by middle-class blacks anyway, had a comparatively limited appeal. West, who now goes by the name Ye, took hip-hop to new heights by offering “luxury rap, the Hermès of verses,” as he put it in a 2011 number, “sophisticated ignorance, write my curses in cursive.” It turned out to be a recipe for 21st-century superstardom. The occasional emotional outburst didn’t hurt either. Since his emergence in 2004, Kanye has won 21 Grammy

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Awards and become a billionaire, one of the wealthiest black people in America.

West also spent all October and early November waging a war of words against the Jews. The unusual thing about his meltdown isn’t that a major black public figure decided to go “death con 3 On JEWISH PEOPLE,” as he tweeted. Nor is it that a black anti-Semite was raised middle-class and is now rich, rather than poor. What's unusual is that black leaders, intellectuals, and masses haven't rallied to his defense with excuses and recriminations.

The naive view is that the refusal to defend West marks a sea shift in black attitudes toward Jews, transcending the impulse to defend the indefensible just because it was done by a fellow African American. The cynical view is that if West hadn't first angered black people with his comment that slavery was “a choice,” and betrayed black leaders with his decision to put on the MAGA cap, the reaction would have been entirely different.

West's accusations are as follows. Record labels managed by Jews have screwed him. “Jewish people have owned the black voice.” George Soros controls the world silently. “If Rahm is sitting next to Obama, or Jared is sitting next to Trump, there is a Jewish person right there controlling the country.” Abortion is a holocaust against black people, and blacks are “programmed” to get abortions by the Jewish media. Jews first came into money as divorce lawyers, and they took his kids away. The “Jewish Zionists” told his Christian ex-wife Kim Kardashian to start behaving immorally. He compared himself to a 14-year-old girl who has been raped for years and then says, as a result, that she hates all men. He said he can't be an anti-Semite because blacks are Jews. He admires Louis Farrakhan. A Jewish doctor lied by diagnosing him with bipolar disorder. He has been off medication for two years.

In other words, Kanye West has lost his mind. But that doesn't explain enough. If West had blamed the Iroquois for his woes, that would be unhinged. But he didn’t. He blamed the Jews, and that's no accident of mental illness. West found a powerful political explanation for his experience, one that already has a pedigree in the black community—anti-Semitism.

Look at his accusations again:

Reference to Jewish exploitation is de rigueur in writings about blacks and Jews. Kanye blames record labels; historically, the Jewish villain was a landlord or shopkeeper.
If West hadn’t first raised the ire of black leaders with his friendly treatment of Donald Trump, we would hear now that he’s speaking from a place of pain.

of Black Power rhetoric in the 1960s and ’70s, with wild accusations against teachers’-union leader Albert Shanker, “Zionists,” and sometimes both at the same time. The crimes Jews are said to commit are demonic; note West’s invocation of child rape. In October, the basketball player Kyrie Irving promoted a movie that accuses Jews of Satan-worship. In these cases, Jews are not so much dehumanized as rendered anti-human, an enemy of all.

That West can’t be an anti-Semite because he is a Semite is an adaptation of an old, disingenuous Arab claim. The preachment of many of the sects called the Black Hebrew Israelites is that racist Jews have been suppressing the truth of black Jewishness, or even that blacks are the real Jews, leaving the fake ones as devilish imposters.

Even West’s desperate accusation against his psychiatrist is hardly novel. On February 4, 1961, the *Amsterdam News*, New York’s major black paper, published an article, headlined “They Let Them Die,” on how Jewish doctors went to Harlem Hospital to “pick out a number of Negro patients whom they carried off to Mt. Sinai for experimentation.” In reality, Harlem Hospital was over capacity and so Mt. Sinai agreed to take on surplus cases. But writers, editors, and many readers were only too ready to receive news of Jewish Mengele-ism.

These people weren’t simply crazy. They may not have been crazy at all. Neither were the black student groups at Harvard, Columbia, and many other colleges who invited Farrakhan representatives to speak in the 1980s and ’90s. Now, as then, anti-Semitism has a function: It translates traditional and retrograde attitudes into a political interpretation with potential for radical social action.

So it was in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, where local preachers laid the groundwork and served as apologists for the deadly 1991 riots. For three days, black rioters proclaiming themselves the second coming of Hitler beat up any Jew they could find. In this magazine in November 1979, Dorothy Rabinowitz foresaw the violence, noting that in Crown Heights, “public expression of anti-Semitic sentiment, as a means of conveying political antagonism, seems now to have become normal.” When I spoke to one of the rabble-rousing black reverends in 2021, he still justi-
Any confrontation with black anti-Semitism incurs risk for Jews, but it is necessary. Black anti-Semitism places Jews in physical danger every day on the streets of Brooklyn.

and so is the guy who sucker punches a Hasid in Brooklyn. They hear the same noise—and each other.

West has found himself with few elite allies today, but as the writer Hussein Aboubakr Mansour points out, his analysis of American life has become hegemonic in refined circles. Think about it. There’s a structure that controls everything in America but is “mystified and hidden from critique.” The structure, formed by actions over many years by disparate individuals in positions of power, manipulates society, rigging the game. Instead of “Jewish power,” however, the structure is called “white supremacy.” Critical race theorists speak of white universities, white corporations, and white media, with “white” signifying a corrupt essence and hidden hand.

Mansour calls this “a German way of thinking.” West uses it, and his focus on Jews allows him to make black grievances coterminous with white grievances, rather than putting them at odds. “Who you think created cancel culture?” West tweeted, along with “I’m starting to think anti-Semitic means n-----r.” Anti-Semitism makes for a “wider tent” than critical race theory, Mansour writes, allowing both blacks and whites to claim victimhood.

Dropped by CAA, Gap, Adidas, and Balenciaga in a matter of days, Kanye West, too, can be portrayed as a victim of Jewish aggression. Jesse Jackson tried this during his 1984 presidential campaign; after pointedly refusing to repudiate Farrakhan for praising Hitler, and suffering politically for it, Jackson claimed that the Jews were persecuting him, and then he continued using Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam bodyguards.

It’s the old complaint: This animal is very wicked, just see what happens if you kick it. It is the essence of the distressingly common obfuscation with which white grievances, rather than putting them at odds. “Who you think created cancel culture?” West tweeted, along with “I’m starting to think anti Semitic means n-----r.” Anti-Semitism makes for a “wider tent” than critical race theory, Mansour writes, allowing both blacks and whites to claim victimhood.

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It’s the old complaint: This animal is very wicked, just see what happens if you kick it. It is the essence of the distressingly common obfuscation with which the “Jewish response” to Kanye West’s anti-Semitism “proves Kanye’s point.” It’s a clever remark, but flat wrong. Adidas running from bad press doesn’t come close to proving a Jewish media conspiracy to destroy black people, let alone run the world. It proves only that crude and crazy-sounding conspiracies about Jews place their promoters out of bounds in American public life.

To say that Jews have proved Kanye West’s point is merely to copy Kanye’s bigoted pattern from a safer remove. It treats the actions of every Jew as a collective expression of all of Jewry, and it ascribes devilish motives where decent ones are far more plausible: Jews tend to take offense at conspiratorial slanders, knowing well where they can lead.

It is remarkable, as Milton Himmelfarb wrote in Commentary in March 1969, that “in the black rhetoric the Negro seems to have only two external enemies in the United States, whites generally and Jews specifically.” There was, however, good reason for black cultural isolationists to fixate on Jews, rather than, say, Italians or Poles. A verbal stab at the Jews, blacks’ best allies by any metric, is sure to accomplish two things. First, it elicits a hurt, furious reaction from a bevy of Jewish organizations, drawing media attention. Second, it places black integrationists in a bind: Either they condemn their fellow black and lose some credibility with the black street, or they defend a black anti-Semite and precipitate a break with their Jewish allies.

As Henry Louis Gates Jr. put it in 1992, “the new anti-Semitism arises not in spite of the black-Jewish alliance, but because of that alliance.” Transracial cooperation, and the political and cultural vistas it opens up, is taken as a threat to racial authenticity and radical resistance. For black isolationists, writes Gates, “the original sin of American Jews was their involvement—truly ‘inordinate,’ truly ‘disproportionate’—not in slavery,” as was typically alleged, “but in the front ranks of the civil rights struggle.” Jewish record producers have been disproportionately guilty not of stifling black music, but of championing and popularizing it, inevitably bringing about some of the same difficult compromises of integration.

Any confrontation with black anti-Semitism incurs risk for Jews, but it is necessary. First, black anti-Semitism places traditional Jews in physical danger every day on the streets of Brooklyn and not only there. Many Jews have moved to neighborhoods where they can usually avoid being mugged by such a reality, but some won’t—or can’t afford to. They are owed practical, moral, and political support, including against progressives whose policies release criminal Jew-haters to the streets, where they can attack again.

Second, black anti-Semitism has a unique ability to strike at the heart of liberalism, the older kind that has often made exile in America seem for Jews like a

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vacation from history. Jewish success and prominence in America—taken by some as a standing insult—have hinged on liberal principles of merit, equality before the law, pluralism, free expression, and individual rights, as opposed to group privileges. Black anti-Semitism, in denying the legitimacy of Jewish success and prominence, is also an assault on those ruling principles. Its deeper meaning is to call the American system a fraud, a manipulation, and a conspiracy.

Kanye West doesn’t need to be told how hurtful his comments are, or how illiberal. He knows and smirks about it in his interviews. He doesn’t need to be taken to Yad Vashem to learn. He doesn’t want to learn—and he smirks about that, too. He needs to be refuted on the facts of American life, his explanations countered by more convincing explanations, his ideas opposed with better ideas. While Kanye West’s ravings make an implicit bid for a transracial politics of anti-Semitism, a competing politics, one that is pro-pluralist and anti-racialist, is far more persuasive to the great mass of Americans. How better to help America than for Jews to make that case?
SUCCESS WON too quickly, or too easily, before the age of 30 will bring the burden of impossible expectations—think of Orson Welles, or Vietnam War Memorial designer Maya Lin. The architect Moshe Safdie might have been one such sad creature, but his brief stint as an overnight sensation did not turn his head. Instead, he became one of architecture’s most respected elder statesmen. This suggests uncommon depth of character, which is also a quality that emanates from his refreshingly unpretentious memoir, *If Walls Could Speak*.

It takes an act of imagination to appreciate just how radical the building that made his reputation was. It caught the zeitgeist, striking its sweet spot so precisely as to loft it into orbit, along with its architect, who became an international celebrity at the age of 29. The building was called Habitat ‘67, and it was located in Montreal, the site of the last great world’s fair. There was hardly a current of modern revolutionary thought—aesthetic, technological, and social—that Habitat ‘67 did not touch. Simply to see a photograph of the realized building—I recall my first sight of one at the age of 10—was to change one’s conception of what architecture could be.

Safdie took 354 prefab concrete modules and drew them together in a rambling 12-story composition—if something as irregular as a coral reef could be called a composition. It defied the notion that a building was an object with a distinct shape; here there was no formal shape whatsoever, only agglomeration. With its stacked interlocking units providing its own paths of circulation, Habitat ‘67 effectively abolished the traditional street and perhaps, if taken to its logical conclusion, the city itself. It anticipated a future in which human habitation itself might be transformed, where one would no longer think in terms of buildings and rooms but cells and capsules. After all, it came to be at a moment when moon bases seemed just around the corner.
Few of us would survive such a staggering debut. But far from trying to repeat his early success, Safdie instead became an architect of uncommon range and versatility, with major buildings of culture (the Crystal Bridges Museum in Bentonville, Arkansas) to extravagant resorts (the Marina Bay Sands in Singapore) to poignant memorials (the Holocaust History Museum at Yad Vashem, Israel). It is not the career anyone would have anticipated for the son of a textile merchant in Haifa, where Safdie was born in 1938 and where he would spend the first 15 years of his life.

Safdie speaks affectionately about his childhood, although it had its share of drama. Haifa was bombed during World War II, though not by the Luftwaffe. (“Luckily for us…it was [Italy’s] Regia Aeronautica.”) When Erwin Rommel led the Afrika Korps through the Libyan desert, the family fled for a time to Lebanon. His family was unusually cosmopolitan: His mother had been born in Manchester, the daughter of another textile merchant, while his father came from Aleppo, Syria, which meant that he spoke Arabic and French but very poor Hebrew. The family always had Arab friends, and Safdie grew up speaking Arabic. He spent his summers working on kibbutzim, waking at five a.m. to pick potatoes and fruit, and he took for granted that he would study agriculture.

Business setbacks led the family to emigrate. Safdie’s mother insisted that their new home had to be “an English-speaking democracy,” and in 1953 they found themselves in Montreal. For the first time, Safdie met Jews who were not Israelis, and he found them perplexing. Acutely conscious of their minority status, they had to work at their Jewish identity, while for him “Jewish identity was a fact, not a question.” He quickly became a good student, which he had not been in Israel, and upon graduation announced to his parents that he would be enrolling in McGill University’s school of architecture. They were startled, since the only previous indication of any interest in architecture was his habit of doodling designs for cars.

Safdie’s six years at McGill were transformative. The school treated architecture as building, not art, and the professors who left the deepest impression stressed the practical issues of site and materials. Offers began pouring in. Mayor John Lindsay visited Habitat, was impressed, and a site for a 30- or 40-story high-rise Habitat was found on the East River in Lower Manhattan. George Romney, who would soon serve as secretary of Housing and Urban Development under President Nixon, was also impressed; planning began for two gargantuan resorts (the Marina Bay Sands in Singapore) to poetic memorials (the Crystal Bridges Museum in Bentonville, Arkansas) to transformative. The school treated architecture as building, not art, and the professors who left the deepest impression stressed the practical issues of site and materials.

In retrospect, he writes, it was the exact right moment to study architecture. He came to his profession at a time when there was still an implicit belief that an architect needed a sense of social responsibility. The calling was to make buildings that would benefit all of society, not merely the wealthy, and that would address the fundamental need for humane housing, infrastructure, and transportation. All this, he writes, “resonated with values I had absorbed as a youth in Israel.”

After graduation, he spent a year in the office of Louis I. Kahn, the late-blooming Philadelphia architect who was just then hitting his stride. Kahn’s buildings did not try to conceal their humble air ducts and stair towers behind elegant façades that were essentially stage scenery; instead, they embraced the blunt reality of their existence. All this offered an alternative to an international-style modernism that had become formulaic and predictable, and Safdie found it exhilarating. He befriended Anne Tyng, Kahn’s assistant and the mother of his daughter Alex, and was struck by her obsessive experiments in making buildings out of interlocking geometric modules. He returned to Montreal in mid-1963 to work on Expo ’67. His Habitat was the star construct of the fair, eclipsing even Buckminster Fuller’s massive and astonishing geodesic dome that served as the American pavilion.

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new Habitats, one in Washington, D.C., and another in Puerto Rico. There was even to be a Habitat Jerusalem. None of these came to pass—it was all “false starts and dead ends,” he notes with chagrin—but it was in Jerusalem that he came to find his footing.

Safdie returned to Israel for an architectural conference in Tel Aviv at the end of 1967 and was dismayed by the changes in the country. It had become more provincial, less glamorous, and decidedly uglier, despoiled as the landscape was by shikunim, drab five-story concrete apartment houses built in the late 1950s to accommodate the waves of new immigrants. Most of them came from Arab countries, another surprise for Safdie, who as a schoolboy had been “the only Sephardi in a class of Ashkenazim.” Not until he left Tel Aviv for Israel’s countryside did he encounter the beauty he remembered.

At that conference Safdie met and befriended Teddy Kollek, who two years earlier had been elected mayor of Jerusalem, then a relatively small city. But Israel had just wrested the Old City from Jordan in the Six-Day War, which doubled Kollek’s jurisdiction and gave him a population that was one-third Arab. This had architectural ramifications, and Safdie was offered commissions. One was to create a whole new neighborhood, Mamilla, a 25-acre site on the former no-man’s-land between the Israeli and Jordanian quarters. Another was to redesign the quarter around the Western Wall, which would have involved excavating down to the original Herodian pavement, in effect making the wall 30 feet higher. The first succeeded while the second came to grief. Even so, by 1971 he had enough work to open a second office in Israel.

Readers without a special interest in architecture but who are interested in the political and cultural life of Israel will find Safdie’s memoir rich in lively anecdote. One is struck again and again by how small its social world is, and how everyone seems to know everyone else. Thus is it possible for Safdie to visit a novelist friend and meet Israel Tal, the general commanding the Israeli tank force, and find himself involved in the design of the new Merkava tank. His contribution was to make it more streamlined and to pull back its projections into a continuous envelope (in effect, he notes with obvious pleasure, making it resemble his beloved Citroën).

During these same years, his North American career was burgeoning. At first glance, it seems odd that a man who burst onto the architectural scene in such radical fashion was being pelted with commissions for civic and cultural buildings. Yet the architectural landscape was changing in the 1970s, the decade of postmodernism—to Safdie’s disgust. “Where modernists were inspired by social ideals,” he writes, “the approach of postmodernists was essentially...
By this he meant that the postmodernists treated architecture as a visual game, without thought of its social consequences, encouraging architects to be glib and self-indulgent.

Safdie summed up his views in a 1981 article in the *Atlantic* with the memorable title “Private Jokes in Public Places.” That piece in turn enraged many in the profession (whom he called out by name) and damaged his relationship with such former friends as Frank Gehry and Philip Johnson. But as it happened, there were still cultural institutions that did not care to build private jokes. Safdie was commissioned to design the new Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the National Gallery in Ottawa, as well as important libraries in Vancouver and Salt Lake City.

Eventually he came to Bentonville, Arkansas, for the Crystal Bridges Museum, created by Alice Walton and supported by the family’s fortune from its empire Walmart stores. (On the way to his job interview, Safdie reveals, he dipped into a Walmart store, something he had never done before.) For the product of one of the staggering art-buying forays in history, Crystal Bridges is not a swaggering building. In fact, it is hardly a building at all but rather an ensemble of pavilions to the other side of a water-filled ravine, connected by a pair of handsome bridges hung from cables. When I reviewed it for *Commentary* in 2011, I could find nothing to fault except the gloominess of the galleries, which I said desperately needed skylights.* I learned from this memoir that Safdie had indeed designed the building with generous skylights (“nothing compares with seeing works of art in natural light”) but that they had been removed during the course of construction by a new and unsympathetic museum director.

Postmodernism may have faded as an architectural movement, but what has not faded is the “permissive” architectural culture, to use Safdie's word, that it engendered. The best-known architects of the present are those who have succeeded in creating instantly recognizable signature styles, which they impart to their designs. Safdie does not do that. He does not conceive his buildings in terms of their image but allows them to emerge out of the specifics of their programs and sites, just as he had been taught some 60 years ago. Those who judge architecture by visual sizzle alone are likely to be underwhelmed.

This is not to say that Safdie does not think in visual terms. He gives a moving account of designing the Holocaust History Museum at Yad Vashem, Israel, a competition he won in 1995. At that time, the release of Soviet archives yielded an immense amount of new documentation for which there was no adequate display space. Given the tragic nature of the program, he decided that he would not build “a massive structure squatting atop a pastoral landscape.” Instead, he conceived the building as a skylit tunnel, bored through the mountain, that would lead the visitor on a journey from light to darkness and to light again. A gentle five-degree downward grade would instill a feeling of quiet mournful procession, until at last the path began to incline slightly upward as it led out the north side of the mountain. The return to light summarized what for Safdie was the essential meaning of the museum: “We prevailed. We are here. Life continues.”

Just as moving is the story of designing Israel’s Ben Gurion Airport, a building type that by nature is a dispiriting and bewildering labyrinth. Determined to make it as humane as possible, he studied the usual scheme, whereby arriving

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*“A Monument to American Ambition,” December 2011.*
passengers are shunted through the sunless lower level while departing passengers pass through bright and airy passages overhead. Recognizing that the arrival in Israel is for many “an emotional event,” particularly for new immigrants and first-time pilgrims, he decided that they should be welcomed with architectural generosity. He inverted the customary scheme, seeing to it that arrivals were lifted up to a “light-filled mezzanine” as soon as possible; at the same time, they would see departing passengers moving on a ramp in another direction, making clear that the airport was “the nation’s gateway.” All this in a building of local Jerusalem stone, carrying a roof that is an inverted dome, its oculus opening into a circular waterfall (a favorite device of Safdie’s).

Safdie is publishing his memoirs at the apogee of his career. In recent years, he has built the Sikh Khalsa Heritage Center in Punjab, India; the Marina Bay Sands Integrated Resort in Singapore; a somewhat belated Habitat at Qinhuangdao, China; and some major buildings in South America. It is sobering to read Safdie describe in his final chapter his buildings in the United States, a nation that, he writes, stands alone among the developed and thriving economies: Japan, Canada, all of Europe. Our major airports—New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, Houston—are a disgrace: inefficient, ugly, unclean. The airports in Singapore, Beijing, Shanghai, Munich, and Madrid lift the spirit; American airports do the opposite. ... Even worse, we can’t keep what we have, no matter how old or new, in a reasonable state of maintenance. Bridges are in disrepair. Highways are being sold off into private hands. Rest areas are strewn with garbage. The sense of civic pride has vanished. So has the capacity to dream big.

Safdie certainly has the perspective to deliver such a verdict. How many architects have moved so freely and gregariously around the world, and through so many and such different societies?

To read If Walls Could Speak is to realize that he has made the most of his life’s journey. Safdie’s curious biography took him from Haifa to Montreal at perhaps the most impressionable age possible. This left him with two different national and cultural identities, and the necessary elasticity to fit in anywhere. Habitat ’67 fooled everyone, because it turned out it was not the defiant performance of a swagger architect, eager to abolish the city, the street, and all of traditional architecture; rather, it was the principled attempt to make a modern architecture of community as organic and natural as the one he had known in his childhood Haifa.

Foreign clients who want modern American architecture but not necessarily the arrogant American architect who usually comes with it could hardly do better than Safdie, whose unaffected humility stands out in a profession not well-known for that quality.
Wenner Take All

*Like a Rolling Stone: A Memoir*
By Jann Wenner
Little Brown, 576 pages

Reviewed by Rick Marin

JANN WENNER isn’t a rock star, but he has spent a lifetime with them as founding editor and publisher of *Rolling Stone* magazine and a co-founder of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. So no surprise that his autobiography, *Like a Rolling Stone: A Memoir*, moves to the same rhythm as the last two Hall of Famer books I read: Keith Richards’s *Life* and Bruce Springsteen’s *Born to Run*.

They all start out fast and fun, with a beat you can dance to. From the precocious early years to 10,000 hours mastering the craft, the impoverished struggle, brutal rejections presaging the Big Break, followed by the prodigious flow of creativity amply rewarded with fame, fortune, and groupies, they eventually levels off into some form of equilibrium until the set list closes not with death but something worse: They become bourgeois. Bruce goes into therapy. Keith whiles away his twilight years frying up bangers and mash at his Sussex estate. Jann buys himself a private jet. The stone stops rolling. Moss gathers. That’s not to say there aren’t still plenty of Greatest Hits along the way.

Rick Marin, whose "The Godfather at 50" appeared in our September issue, is a former columnist for the New York Times and a television writer living in Los Angeles.

Jan Simon Wenner was born in New York in 1946 to secular Jewish parents, Sim and Edward Wenner, who moved to the Bay Area when he was a boy and divorced soon after. His father was a “Mad Men-era pipe smoker” with a gift for making money, his mother a creative free spirit who nurtured her son’s interest in writing, which he cultivated at the Orange County boarding school where his parents parked him once they split. That was also when he added the extra “n” to his first name (pronounced yann) and generally enjoyed his life has a happy bad boy. And while he says there was no “openly homosexual culture” at the school, he makes it clear that stuff was going on among teachers, teachers and students, students and other students—the sort of illicit behavior a character in the movie *Withnail & I* calls “sensitive crimes in a punt with a chap named Norman.”

I mention this because Wenner’s convoluted relationship with his homosexuality is a major through line of the book. When he got to Berkeley to attend college, the first thing he noticed was that “the girls were pretty.” He squired San Francisco debutantes around in a 1954 Jaguar XK120—veryflashride—and would soon marry a gorgeous New Yorker named Jane Schindelheim, a Jewish American Princess the San Francisco gossip columnist Herb Caen dubbed “Bloomingdale’s by the Bay.”

At the same time, Wenner eluded the draft by confessing to “homosexual ideation.”

More on the vicissitudes of his sexuality later. The reality of these early years, and probably his entire life, is that Jann Wenner’s number-one focus wasn’t sex, but Jann Wenner. That and the magazine he founded at 21 with $7,500 in seed money that he would grow into a media empire worth hundreds of millions.

*Rolling Stone* debuted in 1967 as a tabloid-sized biweekly that took its name from an old Muddy Waters blues song (as did both the Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan’s most famous anthem). It was conceived to service the Haight-Ashbury counterculture Wenner was bell-bottom deep in. He was dropping vast quantities of LSD and hanging out with Neal Cassady, who was a character in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* before he became the driver of Ken Kesey’s Magic Bus. Wenner dabbled in the radical movements fomenting around him, but he assessed Yippie agitators Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman as “hustlers.”

So while drugs and politics would suffuse *Rolling Stone*, Wenner made its focus his first love: rock and roll. It’s clear from his account of the late ’60s and early ’70s that Wenner was no hippie. He was a businessman, like his father: “I liked structure, organization, and leadership.” His writers wore jeans and T-shirts, but he favored three-piece suits. He had an instinct for packaging and marketing the revolution.

To sell subscriptions, he offered readers two mail-in coupons: one to purchase a year’s subscription for $10; the other said simply, “Rolling Stone sucks.” His founding partner was Ralph J. Gleason, a respected *San Francisco Chronicle* music columnist, co-founder of the Monterey Jazz Festival and *éminence grise* to rock and jazz musicians and writers alike. Gleason, who was almost 30 years older than Wenner, didn’t drink any-
body’s Kool-Aid, inveighing against violence by “so-called revolutionaries” and schooling revered rock guitarist Mike Bloomfield to stop pretending to be black.

A great magazine editor, like the best college or pro sports coaches, has to build a great team to win. Among the first *Rolling Stone* recruits were Lester Bangs (the Johnny Rotten of rock writers), the photographer Annie Liebowitz (still a 20-year-old art student), and Joe Eszterhas (a loose cannon from the Cleveland Plain Dealer who carried a buck knife and went on to make millions in Hollywood). But probably Wenner’s best and most famous/infamous hire was the Kentucky-born author of *Hell’s Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga*: Hunter S. Thompson.

Like Tom Wolfe, Thompson was a protean, prolific practitioner of a new style of reportage labeled New Journalism. And like Wolfe with his bespoke white suits and spats, Thompson spent almost as much time curating his own image as a drug-fueled “gonzo” iconoclast as he did covering his subjects. His book *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* started as free-form rantings he sent Wenner via the “mojo wire” (his portable fax machine). Wenner assigned Thompson to the National Affairs Desk, which led to *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail ’72*. He was viciously anti-establishment but could talk to Nixon about football and forged an *Odd Couple* rapport with Pat Buchanan.

Thompson’s agent also represented Wolfe, whom Wenner poached from *New York* to turn his wry, cyclopic eye on NASA for an epic piece that would become *The Right Stuff*. They became lifelong friends, despite Wolfe’s politics being notably to the right of *Rolling Stone*’s.

In 1977, *Rolling Stone* relocated from San Francisco to New York, a move Wenner associates with another life-changing event: meeting Jacqueline Onassis. In New York, he writes, “ambition was the sustenance that was necessary for staying alive.” It was also where the ad money was—revenue *Rolling Stone* was now rolling in. For a compulsive climber like Wenner, New York society was a mountain even more worthy of ascent than the Rushmore of rock royalty.

The book shamelessly drops names from the beginning—but they’re legit names to drop, Wenner having been an early confidant of Mick Jagger, John Lennon, Pete Townsend... The list goes on. And on. But once he gets to New York, it’s all “Christmases with Jackie” and the time she invited him over to watch Uri Geller (the Israeli psychic) bend a spoon—the inanity of which encounter seems lost on him. His stock in trade became gossip, not journalism. Hunter Thompson called him on his new priorities, claiming to have received an issue of *Newsweek* with a “photo of Caroline Kennedy rolling Jann through the door of Elaine’s in a custom built, cut-glass dolly from Neiman Marcus.” Wenner’s life changed. “Two weeks on a yacht is heady stuff and you soon get spoiled,” he confesses. “There would be no turning back.”

Though he claims not to have been into the Studio 54 scene in the late 1970s, he cops to massive drug abuse—“my year of living desultorily”—that he now regrets. “It was a waste of money, energy, and precious time.” He appeared, as himself, in terrible movies such as *Perfect* and began to run with the “Gay Mafia”—David Geffen, Barry Diller. And yet when Richard Gere asked whether he was a made man in that velvet mafia, Wenner’s official answer was still no. He was

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married to Jane. They had three sons. He was in the closet. Until he wasn’t. He finally admitted his affair with designer Matt Nye, got divorced, and started a new family that produced yet more children. At his 60th birthday, the actor Michael Douglas said his old friend hadn’t changed much since their halcyon youth in the streets of San Francisco. He’d just become “richer and gayer.”

Once *Rolling Stone’s* circulation hit 1 million, there was enough in the till for Wenner to throw down on a Gulfstream II. No turning back indeed. Mick Jagger announced Wenner’s arrival at a Stones concert, shouting: “Here he comes! Straight from his private jet, it’s Jann Wenner. The world’s most expensive journalist.”

Incredibly, the really big money was still to come. Wenner Media added *Men’s Journal* to its portfolio and a puckish *People* competitor called *Us*, which he boasts “found the very ganglion of American culture.” It went from monthly to weekly, and in its best year *Us* pulled in a whopping $62 million. By contrast, when I was at *Newsweek*, we considered ourselves lucky to eke out $10 million. Wenner hung a couple of Légers in their new offices on Sixth Avenue to adorn “my gilded life.”

If you can deal with the Toulrette’s name-dropping (so-and-so “turned out to be Robert De Niro’s first cousin”), Wenner’s writing is surprisingly lively. He takes the time to ID his writers with pithy thumbnails. One wore glasses with “lenses so thick his eyes appeared to be swimming.” Cameron Crowe (who wrote the article immortalized in the movie *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*) was, at 17, “the oldest looking young man I had ever seen.” But the book’s 576 pages start to get skimmable as Wenner’s life turns into litany of star-studded victory laps—*Rolling Stone’s* 50th anniversary, Wenner’s 70th birthday—and obits: Hunter Thompson, Tom Wolfe, Jerry Garcia, and his own mother, whose dying words to her son were “Get your filthy hands off me.” He hands the online division over to his son, Gus, while he goes under the knife for a bum ticker. It’s all pretty bleak stuff, and boring: “The dog sleeps at my feet.” Yeah, he’s not the only one.

All empires have an expiration date. The Internet loomed. And the magazine that had won its share of National Magazine Awards went down in disgrace over a made-up story about a University of Virginia student claiming to have been gang-raped at a frat party. Managing Editor Will Dana (a friend and neighbor of mine at the time) was eventually fired, and in 2017, Wenner sold the controlling interest in *Rolling Stone*, now shrunken in size and reputation, to the automobile heir Jay Penske. That same year he sold *Men’s Journal* and *Us* to the supermarket tabloid king and Trump apologist David Pecker. Ah, Boomers. Tune in, turn on, sell out. If Wenner made his name giving voice to his generation, he ended up that way too—an old, smug fatcat who’s anything but rock-and-roll.  

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**Minimalism Is No Solution**

*The Problem of Democracy: America, the Middle East, and the Rise and Fall of an Idea*  
By Shadi Hamid  
Oxford University Press, 327 pages

**Reviewed by Brian Stewart**

BY THE end of his presidency, President Clinton had fallen into the habit of declaring that Americans should approach the 21st century with optimism since more people lived in democracies than ever before. Now it appears the seemingly inexorable advance of freedom around the globe was a mirage. Rather than witnessing the further spread of liberty, we have suffered a worldwide recession of freedom.

**Brian Stewart** is a political writer in New York.

The Middle East remains a largely barren landscape of autocracy. In *The Problem of Democracy*, Shadi Hamid argues persuasively that the desolation of politics in the Middle East is not unrelated to the wider crisis of democracy. A senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a student of political Islam, Hamid is well positioned to examine the recent evolution of the United States and the role that its relationship with the world of the Arabs has played in that evolution.

After decades of nurturing and facilitating a culture of tyranny in Arab-Muslim lands, Hamid argues, the United States has grown susceptible to an anti-democratic fever of its own. “Existential politics”—in which citizens don’t respect the outcomes of democratic elections that go against their wishes—is no longer confined to the austere redoubts of the Middle East.
It has put down roots almost wherever citizens enjoy the franchise. “It is the problem of democracy,” Hamid laments.

For proof that mature representative democracies have ceased to be global trendsetters, one need only look at the rapid growth of anti-democratic ideology in what used to be known as the free world. Poisoned by “negative partisanship” and noxious conspiracy theories, democratic politics today regularly displays a paranoid style teeming with malice and bigotry. That is true in America as well, Hamid writes, where Americans in both parties “are doubting both their own democracy and the democratic idea itself.”

By drawing on the experience of the Middle East, Hamid offers a new and original contribution to what has become an entirely conventional argument. In the postwar period, presidents of both parties “sought ‘stability’ in this region through a web of partnerships with friendly if unsavory autocrats whose military and secret police are maintained by American largesse. In his view, the confluence of American aid and Arab repression has bred an illusory stability that actually runs counter to those interests. Hamid proposes a compact that would reverse the myopic policies that have helped reduce the Middle East to a political slum. “The organizing principle in any ‘democracy-first’ strategy,” he writes, “is discouraging repression wherever possible, through either positive incentives or punitive measures.”

In this vision, fostering political pluralism in the world’s least democratic region would be concentrated not on America’s enemies but on its friends. It is the servile regimes of the Gulf and Egypt over whom the United States wields greater leverage and who, Hamid argues, “need us more than we need them.”

If America’s betrayal of the democratic ideal over slavery defiled its banner then, a similar phenomenon may now be playing out in reverse, with America’s neglect of the democratic ethic in the Middle East aggravating Americans’ loss of faith in democracy at home. For Hamid, restoring America’s “just influence” in the world while resolving, or at least ameliorating, its core dilemma requires cutting liberalism loose to allow the United States to focus on defending democracy tout court. This “democratic minimalism,” he explains, would “privilege democracy, with its emphasis on the preference of majorities or pluralities through regular elections and the rotation of power, over liberalism, which prioritizes individual freedoms, personal autonomy, and social progressivism.”

Hamid believes that his minimalist conception of democracy “with no prejudice to substantive ideological outcomes” is the way out of our democratic dilemma. I do not think this is a compromise Americans can make, at least not while retaining fidelity to the philosophy of the Founding.

The specter of Islamists claiming control through free elections has been the reason American administrations have supported some Arab autocrats who squelch any movement toward representative rule. While reading The Problem of Democracy, I kept recalling Abraham Lincoln’s 1854 speech at Peoria on the Kansas-Nebraska Act, in which the greatest American statesman declared his hatred of slavery on the grounds that it deprived “our republican example of its just influence in the world.”

The depravity of involuntary servitude, Lincoln argued, diminished the United States in various ways. It enabled enemies of freedom to taunt America “with plausibility” as being hypocritical while causing friends of freedom to doubt American sincerity. And it forced many Americans into “an open war with the very principles of civil liberty.”

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Imagine you’re hiking on a rocky backwoods trail in Yosemite National Park, and you accidentally drop a glass bottle that shatters everywhere. If you knew with certainty that a hiker on the same trail the next day would cut herself on the broken glass, you would surely clean up after yourself, as you would if you knew that the hiker was going to hit the trail the following week.

But what if you knew that the hiker wouldn’t arrive for another year? Or 10 years? Or a thousand years? Would you still feel obliged to clear away the shards? At what point would your moral responsibility to prevent injury to a future hiker begin to wane?

If you ask William MacAskill, the answer is, essentially, never. MacAskill is an Oxford philosopher, a founder of the so-called effective altruism movement, and the author of the thought-provoking, meticulously researched, but theoretically and practically flawed new book *What We Owe the Future*. He labels his governing framework “longtermism,” which he defines as “the idea that positively influencing the longterm future is a key moral priority of our time,” the notion of “taking seriously just how big the future could be and how high the stakes are in shaping it.”

Effective altruism emerged in the mid-2000s as something like the philanthropic expression of the extreme utilitarianism of Princeton philosopher Peter Singer. Effective altruists generally eschew “feel good” work in the nonprofit sector in favor of employment in the world of finance coupled with massive charitable contributions. It is far better, they reckon, to save dozens of lives in the developing world with surplus income from a lucrative hedge-fund position than to marginally improve an NGO supplying laptops to the Global South. Like MacAskill himself, many effective altruists practice what they preach, living frugally in large groups in cramped quarters and abjuring even the most basic luxuries in order to give away what they earn.

The movement, criticized by some as overly cold and calculating, has exploded in recent years. According to the *New Yorker*, EA “controls philanthropic resources on the order of thirty billion dollars,” including, most prominently, the support of Sam Bankman-Fried, the 30-year-old crypto pioneer and wunderkind billionaire. Generously endowed EA-affiliated entities with names like Open Philanthropy, GiveWell, Rethink Priorities, and the Forethought Foundation have sprouted on both sides of the Atlantic. And this year, for the first time, an EA-oriented candidate ran for Congress, placing second in an Oregon Democratic primary.

Lately, EAs have trained their fire on enhancing the distant future. In his book, MacAskill focuses his analysis on four key claims: “that, impartially considered, future people should count for no less, morally, than the present generation; there may be a huge number of future people; that life, for them, could be extraordinarily good or inordinately bad; and that we really can make a difference to the world they inhabit.”

If you assume that humanity will last at least as long as the typical mammalian species, MacAskill argues, we’ve still got another 700,000 years remaining before we go the way of the dodo. In that case, we can expect another 80 trillion future people to exist—10,000 times the current global population.

Humanity could, of course, kill itself off within centuries, decades, or even years. MacAskill estimates a 1 percent probability that civilizational collapse—whether as a result of a calamitous nuclear war, a global pandemic caused by engineered pathogens, or catastrophic climate change—could occur within this century. That’s 100 times the risk of an individual dying in a car crash in any given year. And the likelihood of global breakdown increases significantly as we move beyond this century. “If humanity is like a teenager,” he suggests, “then she is one who speeds round blind corners, drunk, without wearing a seat belt.”

But we could also figure out ways to survive much longer. He asserts that Earth will remain habitable for 500 million years, the sun will keep burning for another 5 billion years, and other stars will shine for trillions of years.
Thus, whether we're staving off irreversible disaster or improving conditions for our future selves, the stakes are sky-high.

In the most fascinating and tightly argued section, MacAskill explains why we should welcome population growth as a positive good, vigorously advocating increased fertility. He begins by claiming that "having one extra person in the world is good in and of itself, if that person is sufficiently happy"—a notion that's superficially self-evident but hotly debated in the field of population ethics, where a prominent scholar once quipped that "we are in favor of making people happy, but neutral about making happy people."

MacAskill contends that "if your children have lives that are sufficiently good, then your decision to have them is good for them. With a sufficiently good upbringing, having a chance to experience this world is a benefit. And, by the same token, if you have grandchildren, you benefit them, too." From this conclusion comes another: "If future civilization will be good enough, then we should not merely try to avoid near-term extinction. We should also hope that future civilization will be big."

He means that we should expand the human population as much as possible, including into space. Surveying mountains of survey data, he claims that only some 10 percent of people worldwide are genuinely unhappy, that happiness is correlated with wealth, and that global wealth will only continue to swell in the long run—meaning we can reasonably expect happier people in the future.

But swelling populations mean escalating risks. As global values converge, and as we see the emergence of an artificial general intelligence (AGI), which would be capable of learning and performing tasks at least as well as human beings, we must be wary of oligarchs or other malign actors promulgating, reproducing, and enshrining ideologies that could devastate societies worldwide. So we therefore must carefully monitor the technical progress of AGI and establish international governing bodies to ensure it does not fall into the wrong hands.

More broadly, though, what can we do to ensure a prosperous future? MacAskill urges us to "take robustly good actions, build up options, [and] learn more." He proposes reducing fossil-fuel usage and developing renewable technology, fostering a diversity of political systems and cultures, and objectively researching the scientific and philosophical issues entailed by extending and enhancing the future of humanity. He also reiterates the injunctions he provided in his 2015 book *Doing Good Better*, urging his readers to donate their income to effective charities instead of obsessing about personal consumption habits.

MACASKILL deserves praise for presenting these issues in a provocative and systematic way that neatly balances realism and optimism. He jars us out of complacency and challenges those who share his ideological inclinations to entertain alternative viewpoints. Still, *What We Owe the Future* remains an incomplete account that overstates the simplicity of his proposed solutions, neglects much of the good that humanity provides, and underestimates our natural inclination to remain in the here and now.

Take, for instance, the notion of "moral progress." MacAskill prominently cites the abolition of slavery as the prime illustration of the arc of history bending toward justice because of the contingency of human action, and more specifically, the stirring of a strong moral sense among humanity. But not every moral problem is as cut-and-dried as slavery. MacAskill seeks to enlist "morally motivated heretics who are able to endure ridicule from those who wish to preserve the status quo," and he hopes that, one day, humanity will regard burning fossil fuels and eating animals as equally barbaric as owning human beings. He can hope away, but it's worth remembering that in the 1920s, history seemed to be bending inevitably toward the enlightened view that alcohol so perniciously destroyed society that it merited prohibition.

But perhaps the most striking weakness in *What We Owe the Future* comes from his inability to explain why we should want to ensure the future of humanity. As a devotee of Singer and John Stuart Mill, MacAskill characteristically limits his reasoning to net utility,
which he mostly defines as human happiness or well-being. Surely all human societies can and do care deeply about ensuring happiness among their populations. But, especially to people of faith or subscribers to traditional ethical philosophies, life entails far more than individual pleasure.

Existence furnishes humanity not merely with the capacity for happiness but with the opportunity to cultivate virtue, to improve ourselves ethically and philosophically—in short, to become better people. We naturally want this for ourselves, for our children, and our grandchildren, and we’d like to think that future humans will be even more virtuous than our own best selves. This notion is largely absent from MacAskill’s thinking. He does identify certain “non well-being goods,” including art, liberal democracy, equality, and the development and dissemination of knowledge, but he devotes a mere two pages to these concepts. Surely scientific discovery and creative expression on their own terms warrant the future proliferation of human beings at least as much as their happiness does.

And in truth, MacAskill’s plea to act now for the sake of the distant future is a tough ask. Most people would struggle to envision how failing to clear the hiking trail of broken glass would affect others hundreds, let alone thousands, of years from now. They would, however, recognize the moral importance of cleaning up after themselves in the here and now because we feel our obligations to the current generation and the world we share. That is why adherents to faith traditions or old-fashioned ethical dictates focus their good deeds on those most directly affected by them today—not necessarily at the expense of our future selves but as a priority over them. This is the temporal equivalent of the “charity begins at home” mandate supplied by the ancient Jewish sages.

In the end, MacAskill offers a bracing and incontrovertible reminder that our decisions today entail long-term consequences for the future of humanity. “Few people who ever live,” he writes, “will have as much power to positively influence the future as we do.” But while there may be more efficient ways of ensuring the survival and thriving of life centuries hence than our current modes of thinking, it will likely be more effective in the long run to cultivate virtue, fellow feeling, and public-spiritedness among today’s human beings as a bridge to future us. Perhaps, for most people, the best way to save the future is to improve the present. 

Our human existence furnishes us not merely with the capacity for happiness but with the opportunity to become better people. This notion is largely absent from MacAskill’s thinking in his book.
You could head out to Hollywood and get even richer. It was an updated version of the famous telegram that Herman Mankiewicz sent to his friend Ben Hecht in 1926, telling him to pack his bags and head for the Hollywood Hills. “Millions are to be grabbed out here,” Mankiewicz cabled. “And your only competition is idiots.” For “idiots,” you could substitute “Cal State Northridge grads,” and the meaning would be essentially the same.

In the early 1990s, GQ magazine commissioned an article to explore this cultural phenomenon. It was called, if memory serves, “Smart People, Dumb TV.” I am featured prominently in the article, which is blissfully unavailable online so you’ll just have to take my word for it: I come off as a jerk.

But it’s a measure of how different it all was back then that the invasion of grubby, tacky showbiz by overeducated Ivy League snoots was worthy of a big spread in a Condé Nast publication. And also: Television back then was reflexively categorized as “dumb” by magazine writers and newspaper journalists.

Within a few years, that attitude was inverted. TV was no longer “dumb.” Cultural journals were clogged with pompous think pieces about The Sopranos and the Generation X gestalt of Friends. I remember speaking to a graduate student for an hour about her Ph.D. thesis, which was an investigation into the hermeneutics of the television-show theme song. And if you stood in the middle of a Hollywood studio lot and threw a rock, you’d probably hit a Wesleyan grad.

It didn’t seem like it would ever end. We’d saunter into the office at 10:30 or 11 a.m., the morning after our show aired, and the production assistant would have written the previous night’s rating and audience share on the dry-erase board in the kitchen. It was usually somewhere in the 20-million-viewer range, which meant that more than one-third of every television in use at 9 p.m. on Thursday nights was tuned to Cheers. We’d shrug and get our coffee and begin the work, which would be kicked off by ordering lunch from whatever local restaurant was the most outrageously priced.

That world? Gone. And gone forever. The nutshell version is this: cable-channel explosion, Internet, YouTube, streaming services, ad-dollar diversification, TikTok, corporate debt-service payments, and over-investment in production. Or, even simpler: The go-go years led to an oversupply of product, which led to diminishing demand, which led to (I’m skipping some steps here) layoffs and hiring freezes at studios and networks, radically trimmed production slates, and the general sense around town that the long boom in show business has finally come to an end.

To be fair, it lasted nearly a century. From Herman Mankiewicz’s 1926 telegram to the most recent depressing Warner Brothers Discovery earnings call, the business was doing, as we used to say when there was still a reason to say it, boffo business.

Today, the worst thing you can do for young people trying to break into show business is encourage them. The number of movies in release has never been smaller, and studios are still trying to figure out the economics of the feature-film business in the age of streaming. They have only recently discovered that spending $100 million on a feature film that goes directly to streaming is a money-loser—but then so are multi-episode series that sit, unwatched, on the servers of Netflix, Hulu, Peacock, you name it.

An ambitious young person chasing a show-business bonanza in 2022 needs to be content working in an environment with no big production deals, much smaller episode fees, and a television “season” that lasts six episodes. A writer on a current multi-season television series may eke out the equivalent of an annual salary in the $75,000 range, which in the late 1990s was what a lot of writers were paid per episode.

Oh, and these days, you have to buy your own lunch.

What will happen to the next generation of young people who, like me in 1987, are too bad at math for banking and too lazy for law school? A career in show business is no longer a solid third option. But that may be a good thing. Each generation deserves its own gold rush. ■
The Good Times Lasted a Century

ROB LONG

BROWN BROTHERS Harriman is the oldest private investment bank in the United States and is known for its cautious investment strategy and prudent financial management. These qualities were never more evident than in its decision, in the spring of 1987, not to offer me a job.

The reason was simple: I was utterly unqualified. I was an English major about to graduate and hadn’t even bothered to take a single economics class during my four years in college. And though not technically innumerate, I was not above counting on my fingers. But it was the late 1980s, when the policies of the Reagan administration had kicked off the greatest bull market in history, and TV’s Dynasty and Tom Wolfe’s Bonfire of the Vanities set the cultural tone. If you were a college senior about to graduate, you really had only two smart choices: You could go to work at an investment bank right after commencement, or you could go to law school and then go to work at an investment bank.

And if you couldn’t do either of those, you could pack up your car and head to Hollywood. Which is what I did. And let me tell you, my timing was excellent.

I drove into Los Angeles in a 10-year-old Subaru Outback with a rusted undercarriage and a permanently shut rear passenger side door. It burned a quart of oil a month and needed new radiator fluid about that often. I didn’t fix the car. I let it leak. My theory was, in a few months I’d be a big shot in Hollywood anyway, at which point I’d be able to afford a BMW. Which sounds irrational now, I suppose, but it turned out to be the kind of prudent business decision that would even make sense to a partner at Brown Brothers Harriman. Barely 10 months later, I was a 24-year-old staff writer on Cheers, one of the most successful television shows ever.

Show business, like the financial industry and Silicon Valley, was at the beginning of a very long boom. Broadcast and cable television were geysers of money. Audiences thronged to movie theaters not just on weekends but even on weeknights. It was the age of blockbuster comedies and buddy-cop action movies. The Cosby Show regularly drew 30 million viewers at 8 p.m. on Thursday nights, but even midrange television shows had 20 million loyal viewers.

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Studios would pay writers $1 million for a movie idea after hearing a 15-minute pitch. On the television side, times were even fatter. The writing staffs on some shows often reached two dozen writer-producers. The typical television series produced 26 episodes per season, and middle-ranking writer-producers were routinely making $50,000 dollars per episode. By the early 1990s, young writers, some still in their 20s, had multiyear, multimillion-dollar production deals on top of their producer’s fees.

Around this time, students at fancy colleges and universities back East—and that’s what we called it: back East—noticed that there seemed to be a lot of money sloshing around the sprawl of low-rise stucco buildings and sun-baked streets of Los Angeles. This kicked off a Gold Rush from places such as Cambridge and New Haven. A third option had emerged for smart, ambitious college seniors: In addition to Goldman Sachs and Yale Law, 

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

CONTINUED ON PAGE 55
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 Israeli 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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Facts and Logic About the Middle East

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