GOPocalypse Now?
BY JOHN PODHORETZ

The Victory of Trump's Amateurs
BY JONATHAN S. TOBIN

From the Halls of Montezuma to the Halls of Central High
BY ROBERT PONDISCIO

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## Commentary

**January 2023  Vol. 155 : No. 1**

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To the Editor:

I WISH Barton Swaim had spent more time developing his key argument about the attempt by progressives to delegitimize honest work (“The War on Work,” November). There is such a rich vein to mine here. There are, for example, the Silicon Valley pundits who assert that, within a few years, robots will eliminate the need for human work by doing all the earning for us. There’s also the “Women Should Be Paid for Being Mothers” movement, which goes against more than 50 years of feminist doctrine arguing for greater participation by moms in the corporate workforce.

Instead, Swain spends the second half of his article articulating some familiar but unproven conservative tropes, such as the claim that the private sector is necessarily more productive than public and nonprofit ones because only the free market rewards the creation of useful things.

This argument doesn’t hold up. Consider, for example, airline safety. During my adult years alone, the rate of U.S. airline fatalities has dropped from about 5 deaths per 100 million miles flown in 1975 to an average of under 0.01 (one hundredth of a death) per 100 million miles today.

This fatality-rate reduction of more than 99 percent came thanks to the FAA and NTSB’s highly effective management of air safety, including the FAA’s own air-traffic-control system, the mandating of accident-avoidance devices, and training and maintenance procedures.

Moreover, we have recently seen the dangers of a supposedly more productive private-sector approach: The FAA has allowed Boeing to handle much of the certification work for its new 737 Max model. This privatization move may well have contributed to 346 unnecessary deaths.

Peter Blau
Charlotte, North Carolina

Barton Swaim writes:

I THANK Peter Blau for reading my essay, but I wonder whether...
To the Editor:  

RAY TAKEHY’S article on the Iranian uprising offers truly outstanding analysis (“A Second Iranian Revolution?” November). I lived and worked in Iran from 1977 he should read it again. I don’t think I argued anywhere that “the private sector is necessarily more productive than public and nonprofit ones”—a proposition that seems obviously true, since governments and nonprofit organizations don’t produce much of anything, in the ordinary sense of that word. They have other entirely legitimate roles, which I acknowledged.

I was amused, though, to read that Mr. Blau thinks of the aerospace company Boeing as representative of the private sector and the trend toward “privatization.” By most estimates, Boeing is the largest recipient of government subsidies in the world. Private-sector beneficiaries of large-scale “corporate welfare,” as it’s aptly termed, frequently become dysfunctional, entitled, inefficient, and susceptible to distorted incentives. It’s reasonable to conclude—though I admit not strictly provable—that the disasters to which Mr. Blau refers, namely the two crashes of 737 MAX jets in 2018 and 2019, were in some measure the consequence of Boeing’s heavy reliance on government subsidies and concomitant insulation from market pressures. Whatever the truth about Boeing and government regulation, however, I don’t think it affects the argument of my essay.

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to 1979. The parallels between what happened in Iran in 1978 and 1979 and what is taking place in Iran in 2022 are amazing. Iran does not yet have a charismatic figure like Khomeini to unify the opposition. But the rule of the clerics, the Revolutionary Guard, and the Basiji is destined to collapse in the near future. Forty-three years of corruption, incompetence, mismanagement, repression, nepotism, hypocrisy, and greed are catching up to the ruling elite in Iran. The Iranians are demonstrating that they are a great people with a proud history and culture that go back more than 2,000 years.

Tom Kulick
Chepachet, Rhode Island

To the Editor:

The ARTICLE on the potential Iranian revolution was clearly written by someone who knows Iran well. I was not aware of the full Rex Cinema fire story, and I wonder: Do most Iranians know that Khomeini engineered it? Thanks for publishing this great piece of journalism.

Neil Hokanson
Cardiff-by-the-Sea, California

Ray Takeyh writes:

I WISH TO express my gratitude to the readers who chose to respond to my article. COMMENTARY always has the most discerning of readers. Neil Hokanson raised a point that deserves some elaboration. The Rex Cinema bombing was clearly a turning point in the revolution. And yes, the subsequent trials revealed that it was done by Khomeini’s followers and not the shah’s secret police. However, it must be noted that there is not yet a smoking-gun document showing that Khomeini ordered the bombing. The case against him is circumstantial but convincing.

Cinemas in Iran had been targeted before this. The revolutionaries had bombed about 30 of them. Khomeini detested cinemas and considered them a source of Western cultural pollution. He once mused that “the Muslim people consider such centers to be against the interests of the country and think they ought to be destroyed without the clergy giving any instructions to this effect.”

In the summer of 1978, the shah was busy negotiating with more moderate opposition figures about a new national compact that would usher in a constitutional monarchy with elected parliament. The talks were going well and Khomeini and the Islamists needed a spectacular act of violence to derail the talks and radicalize the populace. On the night of August 19, they succeeded.

Ray Takeyh

To the Editor:

Thank YOU for the excellent article by Ray Takeyh on the current upheaval in Iran. The tragic death of Mahsa Amini was the catalyst that unleashed the rage and frustration across a broad cross section of society.

The multitude of indignities that Iranians have had to tolerate for decades under iron-fisted clerical rule just might set off a profound revolution in the months to come. What is potentially troubling is the stark question of whether a new regime in Tehran would be better or worse than the 40-plus years of Islamic rule.

Would a new government absorb lessons from the current order and the prior monarchy? While the Pahlavi dynasty had its secret police that used repressive methods, Iranians had more freedom, and relations with the West were reasonable.

One can only hope that any future government would protect individual rights, economic development, the rule of law, and improved relations with the region and the West. Iranians could choose to chart a better future that would fully respect the legitimacy of Israel and other sovereign nations.

Christian Milord
Fullerton, California

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Christian Milord
Fullerton, California
Commentary

The Ken Burns Effect

To the Editor:

KEN BURNS’S documentary The U.S. and the Holocaust, reviewed by Jonathan Tobin, ignores the numerous ways that the Roosevelt administration appeased Nazi Germany during the 1930s (“How Ken Burns Misuses the Holocaust,” November).

To take one example, from 1934 to 1936, Roosevelt’s State Department and the U.S. Navy warmly welcomed swastika-bedecked German warships, sent to American ports on “goodwill” missions to project a respectable but formidable image of Nazi Germany. Hitler hoped this would ensure American neutrality in a coming war. These missions helped legitimize Hitler’s rearmament program at a time when it was still possible to block it. During these visits, the U.S. Navy, with the cooperation of the State Department, assisted the German warships in conducting target practice and maneuvers at sea. The State Department did not formulate its own foreign policy; it implemented President Roosevelt’s.

The U.S. Navy high command provided the Nazi officers with tours of U.S. naval facilities. Civic and business groups in many American cities provided a platform for the Nazi warships’ officers, sporting swastika pins, to deliver speeches praising the Third Reich and laced with anti-Semitic invective. Many Jews forcefully protested the Nazi warships’ arrival in their cities. For example, when the Karlsruhe docked in Boston in 1934, Jennie Loitman Barron, head of the Women’s Division of the Boston American Jewish Congress, condemned it as an endorsement of Nazi “persecution and barbarism.” The next year, the Karlsruhe returned bearing 2,000 copies of Mein Kampf, mainly for distribution in the United States. Ignoring thousands of grassroots protestors, a year later the U.S. Navy Department hosted a reception in Washington for the captain and officers of another Nazi warship.

This and other shameful moves on the part of FDR should never have been omitted from Burns’s six-hour documentary.

STEPHEN H. NORWOOD
PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AND JUDAIC STUDIES,
UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

To the Editor:

HAVING NEVER written a dull article, Jonathan Tobin continues his habit by dissecting the Ken Burns documentary, The U.S. and the Holocaust. While being unfailingly polite, Tobin manages to expose the cloying political prejudice in everything Burns produces.

No complete documentary of the Holocaust should ignore the saga of the MS St. Louis. In June 1939, the passengers and crew of the MS St. Louis, having been turned away from Cuba, could see thebeckoning lights of our eastern seaboard as they searched for a welcoming harbor. One person could have prevented their return to Europe, but he refused to intervene, thus consigning more than 900 European Jews to the Holocaust. An infinitesimally small percentage of Americans are aware that Franklin Delano Roosevelt turned the ship away from our shore. Had FDR been a Republican, this obscenity would be common knowledge.

JACK THOMSON
Bend, Oregon

Jonathan Tobin writes:

STEPHEN H. Norwood is correct to point out that there were instances in which the Roosevelt administration went out of its way to avoid confrontation with Nazi Germany. In some cases, it could be argued that the administration was engaging in appeasement.

Nevertheless, FDR’s approach is not analogous to that of figures such as Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain who had a genuine faith in appeasing Adolf Hitler. FDR was clear-eyed in his understanding of the threat that Nazism posed to the West. He also understood that the American people would not tolerate involvement in another European war unless the United States was attacked.

A fair assessment of Roosevelt’s record must embrace both these truths. Ken Burns is far too interested in burnishing FDR’s legacy and using history to buttress contemporary Democratic talking points about immigration policy. And that’s a major reason that his documentary falls so far short of the mark.

I thank Jack Thomson for his generous comments about my work. While he is right to say that not enough Americans know about the tragic saga of the St. Louis, it is also true that Ken Burns did give this episode prominent mention in The U.S. and the Holocaust.
Do Meds Work?

To the Editor:

As a psychiatrist for the past 40 years, I appreciated Bertie Bregman's review of Andrew Scull's book *Desperate Remedies* ("Does Psychiatry Work?" November). I applaud Dr. Bregman for recognizing the painful reality of psychiatric diseases and for declining to buy into the "myth of mental illness" narrative made famous by one of my residency teachers, the late Dr. Thomas Szasz. I also agree with Dr. Bregman that there are significant problems with the reliability and validity of many disease categories in the DSM-5—which in no way diminishes the reality of illnesses such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

My concern, however, is that Dr. Bregman's brief discussion of psychiatric medication (a huge and daunting topic) oversimplifies several complex issues. To his credit, Dr. Bregman notes that "the good news is that the tools we have—therapy and drugs—often help, sometimes a lot." Indeed, this is so. He adds, however, "There's a big placebo effect. In many cases, the patient would likely have improved anyway." He also writes, "When it comes to devastating psychiatric illnesses such as schizophrenia and bipolar disease, the new drugs are no better than the old.... When it comes to more ubiquitous illnesses such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse, even the best drugs we have are barely better than placebos."

Such broad generalizations are not helpful, and a detailed examination of each of the drugs and disease categories Dr. Bregman mentions would require a short textbook. There have been many refinements of psychiatry's somatic treatments over the past 20 to 30 years. With respect to schizophrenia, the development of the atypical antipsychotic drug, clozapine, led to greatly improved outcomes for patients who had not responded to many other antipsychotic medications. I have witnessed almost miraculous restoration of function in many clozapine-treated patients. Unfortunately, this medication is underutilized in current psychiatric practice. With respect to bipolar disorder, it is probably true that no recent medications have proven vastly superior to the "gold standard," lithium. But it is important to point out that lithium—which is also underutilized—has been proven effective not only in stabilizing bipolar disorder, but also in reducing suicide rates among bipolar-disordered patients. This is a success story rarely noted by psychiatry's critics.

With respect to major depression, there is much misunderstanding regarding antidepressants and the so-called placebo effect. The most recent data show that antidepressant treatment is robustly superior to placebos for patients with major depression, though in a fairly small subgroup of patients—about 15 percent of the total cohort of subjects. That figure is derived from clinical studies using only one antidepressant for a short period of time. In actual clinical practice, we can achieve remission in a much higher percentage of depressed patients by using various augmentation strategies and multiple medication trials. Finally, the development of non-medication treatments, such as transcranial magnetic stimulation, and the use of unconventional antidepressants, such as ketamine, are also proving effective in the treatment of depressive disorders.

To be sure, psychiatric diagnosis and treatment are far from ideal, and—as Dr. Bregman points out—there remain many barriers to the effective delivery of psychiatric services. But there is a good deal of optimism in the field, which continues to attract an increasing number of medical-school graduates to psychiatry residency programs. In short, there are good reasons to see the glass as "half full" when it comes to psychiatry's progress.

Ronald W. Pies, M.D., Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry, SUNY Upstate Medical University; Clinical Professor of Psychiatry, Tufts U. School of Medicine
LAST SPRING, after terrorist attacks killed more than a dozen Israelis, the Israel Defense Forces conducted counterterrorism operations throughout the West Bank. On May 11, during a raid in the city of Jenin, a bullet struck and killed Al Jazeera correspondent Shireen Abu Akleh. What happened next is a case study in selective indignation that continues to damage the U.S.-Israel relationship.

Suddenly—and all too predictably—the 51-year-old Akleh, who held U.S. and Palestinian Authority passports and covered the Israeli–Palestinian conflict from her base in Jerusalem, became a martyr for the Palestinian cause and a rallying cry for critics and enemies of Israel. Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas, 18 years into his four-year term, described Akleh’s death as an “execution” at the hands of the Israeli army. A Hamas spokesman said that Israel had “deliberately assassinated” her. Such language reverberated in the United States, where Representative Rashida Tlaib (D., Mich.) said that Israel “murdered” Akleh.

The rush to judgment was as dizzying as it was grotesque. The usual suspects charged Israel with murder before either an autopsy or an official inquiry had been performed. And the imputation that the Israeli military had killed Akleh on purpose was simply slanderous. Israel has the freest press in the Middle East, and the Israel Defense Forces operates under strict rules of engagement that are meant to limit civilian casualties. To argue that what happened in Jenin could have been anything more than a terrible accident is to argue in bad faith.

Yet there is plenty of bad faith to go around, so far as Israel is concerned. Not only did the Palestinian Authority refuse to conduct a joint inquiry with Israel into Akleh’s death, it also would not allow the Israelis to examine the bullet that had killed her. Akleh’s funeral erupted in violence when Israeli riot police clashed with a mob that attempted to turn the sacred rite into a nationalist rally by carrying her casket through the streets of Jerusalem. Global media and nongovernmental organizations issued reports feeding the conspiracy theories surrounding Akleh’s death. And U.S. Democrats looking to court pro-Palestinian constituencies insisted that the Biden administration take a hard line against the armed forces of an American ally.

On May 19, for example, 57 Democratic congressmen sent a letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken and FBI director Christopher Wray demanding that the United States investigate Akleh’s death. On June 6, senators Jon Ossoff (D., Ga.) and Mitt Romney (R., Utah) sent a separate letter to Blinken asking “that the Administration ensure a full and transparent investigation is completed and that justice is served for Ms. Akleh’s death.” And on June 23, Senator Chris Van Hollen (D., Md.) and 23 of his colleagues—roughly half the Senate Democratic caucus—sent their own letter seconding the House Democrats’ request for an FBI investigation.

It’s worth pausing to reflect on the cynical and nakedly political nature of this congressional corre-

Matthew Continetti

is a senior fellow and the Patrick and Charlene Neal Chair in American Prosperity at the American Enterprise Institute.

Why Is the FBI Investigating Israel?
spondence. Since the 1980s, Congress has authorized the FBI to investigate the deaths of Americans overseas at the hands of terrorists and other transnational bad guys—not war correspondents caught up in a battle between a military partner and unlawful combatants. Out of a slippery combination of malice and ignorance, these congressmen were asking the U.S. government to treat Israeli soldiers as international terrorists, all while knowing that Israel would never cooperate in such a farce and that the only real consequence of such an investigation would be a rupture in the alliance between our two countries. No wonder Congress has such low approval ratings.

What’s more, an official inquiry was already under way. On July 4, the State Department announced that U.S. Security Coordinator for Israel and the Palestinian Authority (USSC) Michael Fenzel, a three-star Army general working in cooperation with both the Israeli military and the Palestinian Authority, was unable to reach a definitive conclusion about the origins of the bullet that killed Akleh. Fenzel did say that the evidence leaned in one direction. “By summarizing both investigations,” the State Department said, “the USSC concluded that gunfire from [Israeli] positions was likely responsible for the death of Shireen Abu Akleh.”

Significantly, the State Department underscored that the USSC found no basis to believe that the killing was intentional. Yet this discovery was not enough for Akleh’s family, with whom Blinken met in early July, or for Senator Van Hollen and three of his Democratic colleagues. They sent another letter to Blinken rejecting the USSC findings—insinuating, in other words, that their own government was involved in an international cover-up orchestrated by Zionists—and repeating their call for an FBI inquiry.

Then, on September 5, the IDF said in a statement that, while “it is not possible to unequivocally determine the source of the gunfire which hit and killed Ms. Abu Akleh, there is a high possibility that Ms. Abu Akleh was accidentally hit by IDF gunfire fired toward suspects identified as armed Palestinian gunmen during an exchange of fire.” The IDF did not open a criminal investigation. “The soldier is sorry, and I am sorry,” an IDF spokesman told CNN. “This was not supposed to happen, and it should not happen. He did not do this on purpose.”

The State Department treated the IDF statement as the final word. “We welcome Israel’s review of this tragic incident, and again underscore the importance of accountability in this case, such as policies and procedures to prevent similar incidents from occurring in the future,” said spokesman Ned Price. The bureaucratic tut-tutting was unnecessary and offensive to Israeli ears—American history, after all, is replete with evidence that the best policies and procedures cannot prevent human error or freak occurrences. Still, though, after months of controversy and two investigations, the unfortunate matter appeared finally settled.

Then things got weird. On November 14, months after the IDF report and not long after elections in both Israel and the United States, Israeli defense minister Benny Gantz acknowledged that the FBI had opened an investigation into the Akleh killing. Even more remarkable than this unprecedented move was the fact that neither the White House nor the State Department seemed to be aware of it. The National Security Council provided Axios a banal statement of regret for Akleh’s death. Both the White House and the State Department let it be known that they had had nothing to do with the FBI inquiry. And the Department of Justice would not comment.

The only government that seemed to have its business in order was Israel’s. Gantz said the obvious thing: There was no way Israel would cooperate with the FBI. Van Hollen, meanwhile, cheered the news from his office in Washington. Yet imagine his reaction if the Shin Bet announced an investigation into the U.S. Army.

At the time of writing, no one knows the details of the FBI inquiry, or the identity of the official who authorized it, or how long it will go on before the U.S. government realizes its ineffectuality. What is known is that the anti-Israel gang successfully bullied an agency of the United States government into taking the extraordinary step of treating the military of the Jewish state as a criminal enterprise, with no consideration of the potential fallout in the Greater Middle East or the precedent that might be set for U.S. soldiers in future actions.

Tyrannical governments in China, Iran, Venezuela, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip murder, unjustly imprison, and violate the dignity and human rights of individuals every day, yet the Biden administration sees fit to crack down on Israel. It’s hard to decide whether to be more outraged at Biden’s appeasement of Israel’s enemies or at the confusion and incompetence of his lieutenants.

In early December, Secretary of State Blinken spoke to the anti-Israel group J Street and pledged his commitment to expanding the circle of peace encompassing Israel and her Arab neighbors. “Integrating Israel,” Blinken said, “also means continuing to fight for Israel to be treated the same way as every other nation—no more, no less.” Maybe he should tell that to the FBI.
MAYBE A FEW YEARS in a federal prison will be good for Sam Bankman-Fried. The high-tech grifter went from billionaire to broke in a matter of days when investors realized that his FTX crypto-currency trading platform had vaporized their money. FTX was a Ponzi scheme purpose-built to snare investors like them—people who thought they were smarter than everyone else. SBF, as Bankman-Fried styles himself, is still giving interviews. Like a frat boy who got caught “borrowing” the college president’s car, he seems to think he can still talk his way out of this mess. But he’s about to learn that embezzling money is a crime. Even when the alleged embezzler is a fuzzy-headed nerd who convinced everyone he was just trying to save the world.

He’ll have time in the pokey to reflect on his place in history. Because, like John DeLorean, or Bernie Madoff, or those jerks at Enron—or, heck, like Charles Ponzi—SBF is going to be remembered as the face of an era. For decades to come, he will symbolize a turning point in our culture: the moment we stopped believing in the limitless genius of our tech gurus.

I’ve spent much of my career covering technology. I’ve met visionaries like Akio Morita, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and Elon Musk. And I’ve seen how journalists, investors, and tech fans sometimes erect credulous cults around the entrepreneurs they admire. Fortunately, most tech superstars aren’t crooks like SBF. And their products are more than smoke and mirrors. Steve Jobs’s vision for the Mac, the iPhone, and the iPad really did change the world. And Musk’s Tesla vehicles and SpaceX rockets are reinventing transportation on this planet—and off it. Until this year at least, anyone who invested early in today’s leading tech companies did very, very well.

But for decades, warning signs have been flashing that even entrepreneurial geniuses shouldn’t be immune from skepticism. In the 1990s, Enron claimed to have invented a high-tech system for trading energy supplies. Wall Street and the financial press believed that Enron’s energy wonks were “the smartest guys in the room.” New York Times columnist Paul Krugman signed on as an adviser. When the shell game finally imploded, investors lost billions.

In 2003, Stanford dropout Elizabeth Holmes—an Enron VP’s daughter—launched Theranos. The company was going to revolutionize health care by making lab tests quick and cheap. Holmes recruited famous board members (Henry Kissinger, James Mattis), appeared on magazine covers (Fortune, Forbes, Glamour), and quickly became “the world’s youngest, self-made, female billionaire.” Theranos and Enron had a lot in common. Both companies touted tech platforms that would transform their industries; and, in both cases, even their investors and board members didn’t understand how those technologies worked. Initially, Holmes probably believed her blood-testing gizmo would eventually perform as promised. But when it didn’t, she ordered her staff to start faking test results. She should get out of prison by 2034.
SBF, Holmes, and the Enron gang are outliers, of course. But some of our most acclaimed entrepreneurs have skated pretty close to this ethical precipice. After all, any great tech breakthrough involves a leap of faith on the part of inventors and investors alike. Steve Jobs’s first iPhone demonstration involved elaborate sleights of hand to keep the crash-prone device working. He gambled that the bugs would be fixed before the first units shipped—and they were. Elon Musk is notorious for promising wildly optimistic product timelines. Over time, we remember the gambles that worked and forgive the rest (unless they wind up in court). In fact, we celebrate the entrepreneurial high-wire act.

Or at least we did. These days, our tech visionaries seem to be stumbling more than at any time since the first digital bubble burst two decades ago. It’s not because they are all crooks like SBF. More often they’re just overconfident, or simply in over their heads. Are the wheels coming off the tech juggernaut? There’s no doubt the digital business isn’t what it used to be. Online advertising plummeted in the past year, undermining revenues for platforms including Google, Twitter, and Facebook. Facebook’s parent company has seen its stock price fall more than 60 percent since 2021.

As these businesses tumble, so do our opinions of their founders. From the time he launched Facebook in his dorm room, Mark Zuckerberg was the paradigm of the young tech visionary. His nerdy awkwardness was seen as proof of his brilliance and authenticity. He could do no wrong. Today, Zuckerberg seems a bit lost. With Facebook’s popularity sliding among young people, he bet on the next big thing: a virtual-reality “metaverse” where VR-goggle-wearing users can interact in a vast digital netherworld. He even changed the company’s name to Meta Platforms.Oops. The company’s VR division is on track to lose $10 billion in 2022. Now the company is firing workers and closing offices as quickly as it can.

Amazon is shedding staff as well. Founder Jeff Bezos became one of the world’s richest people by building a company that delivers everything from food to furniture directly to your door. It’s a logistical miracle. But it wasn’t enough. Bezos wanted his company to be even more intertwined with our lives, to be part of our conversations and involved in all our transactions (of which Amazon would take its cut, of course). So the company launched the Alexa voice assistant. The product sold well, and people like using Alexa to cue up their favorite songs. But it turns out they don’t want to order pizzas or plane tickets by talking to a gadget that keeps mixing up “Madonna” and “Wynonna.” Alexa became a “colossal failure,” writes Ars Technica. Amazon’s hardware division is forecast to lose $10 billion this year.

Bezos and Zuckerberg are learning that just because someone is fabulously successful in one arena doesn’t mean he’s a natural genius in every field. But you can see where they would get that idea. Decades of fawning press coverage, tech-fanboy adoration, and massive wealth accumulation can go to a person’s head. No one exemplifies that occupational hazard more than Elon Musk. The thing is, Musk actually has been successful in wildly diverse fields. He moved from Pay Pal to Tesla to SpaceX and defied the skeptics each time. But he has often veered off on quixotic quests: his Hyperloop alternative to high-speed rail, a rooftop solar company that fizzled, his tunnel-boring start-up that has yet to complete a major project despite years of promises. Now Musk says that his Neuralink start-up will begin implanting computer chips in human brains “in about six months.” Along the way he finds time to offer advice on Taiwan’s independence, how to end the war in Ukraine… He’s an instant expert on everything.

It’s enough to make even the most ardent Musk fan want to say: Focus, man. Focus! Musk might be the greatest entrepreneur of his generation, but that doesn’t make him a geopolitical savant, or a neuroscientist, or an infrastructure expert. I’d like to see him salvage Twitter before he goes looking for more dragons to slay. Not so long ago, the media would have overlooked Musk’s overreach. These days he can’t catch a break—especially since he left the progressive reservation and started talking about allowing free speech on the Internet. Imagine the gall.

So far, Sam Bankman-Fried has been getting gentler treatment from the press than Twitter’s new owner. When he appeared at a recent New York Times conference, SBF got a warm round of applause. It probably doesn’t hurt that he dropped $40 million supporting Democrats in the last election cycle. Or that he sluiced millions to liberal journalism outlets.

Now that SBF’s checks are bouncing, maybe our media and financial luminaries see him in a more jaundiced light. They might even look a little more skeptically at all the stories spun by our tech geniuses. It won’t be a moment too soon.

These days, our tech visionaries seem to be stumbling more than at any time since the first digital bubble burst two decades ago. It’s not because they are all crooks like SBF.
TWO CENTURIES AGO, Percy Bysshe Shelley challenged his friend Horace Smith to a 19th-century version of a poetry slam. He had read of the acquisition by the British Museum of the torso of Pharaoh Rameses the Second, known in Greek as Ozymandias, and suggested that both he and Smith write poems about this new exhibit. What Shelley composed became one of the most famous poems in the English language, a reflection on finitude and the limits of power.

It describes the bust of a tyrant on a pedestal bearing a proud proclamation:

“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!”
Nothing beside remains: round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

What is less well known is that after composing this poem, Shelley would come upon another Ozymandian image, one that would inspire him to consider in two brief works of prose the mysterious endurance of the Jewish people. In 1819, Shelley traveled to Italy and was suddenly inspired by his visit to the Arch of Titus in Rome, with its depiction of Jerusalem’s despoiling by the emperor Titus, embodied by the image of the menorah held aloft in a triumphant Roman parade. Soon after, and not long before he drowned on the Italian coast, he wrote down his thoughts, in two “orations,” about the Jewish people. The Shelley scholar Nora Crook notes that there is “nothing quite like them in Shelley’s oeuvre,” as both are compositions “in which Shelley speaks in the person of an imagined contemporary Jew to fellow Jews.”

The first fragment imagines a 19th-century Jew standing at the Arch of Titus, staring at “the desolation of a city.” The Jew describes himself studying the Roman “procession of the victors, bearing in their profane hands the holy candlesticks and the tables of shewbread, and the sacred instruments of the eternal worship of the Jews.” On the opposite panel, he sees the emperor, “crowned with laurel, and surrounded by the tumultuous numbers of his triumphant army.” Titus, in other words, demands that all in his empire look upon his works and despair. Yet studying the destroyed colosseum nearby, the Jew is struck by a realization:

The arch is now mouldering into ruins, and the imagery almost erased by the lapse of fifty generations. Beyond this obscure monument of Hebrew desolation, is seen the tomb of the Destroyer’s family, now a mountain of ruins. The Flavian amphitheater has become a habitation for owls and dragons. The power, of whose possession it was once the type, and of whose departure it is now the emblem, is become a dream and a memory...

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Commentary
Or to put it differently, when it came to the Roman Empire, “nothing beside remains.”

The same, of course, could not be said for Jewish civilization. The menorah borne aloft to Rome ultimately disappeared when the city was sacked by the Vandals, but it was remembered in lamps relit in Jewish homes throughout the centuries, as it will be this and every year at Hanukkah. And if Jews chose to remember the story of one small flask of oil that somehow endured, it was because they view that tiny miracle as a metaphor for their own national life. Shelley’s Ozymandias is a story not only of Egypt, but of nation after nation throughout history—except one.

And Shelley, who, as Crook notes, was often Voltaireian in his attacks on traditional faith, nevertheless seemed to understand this, as he pondered not only the Jewish past but also its future. The second Shelley fragment, also written in Rome, sits today in the University of Tokyo archive; according to the university website, it is “the only known manuscript in the hand of Percy Bysshe Shelley outside the UK, Europe, and the U.S., apart from a few letters. It came to Japan in the latter part of the Meiji era, when Japanese literary scholars were discovering the Romantic Poets and ‘Japonism’ in the West was at its zenith.”

In this second fragment, Shelley, again writing in the voice of a Jew, describes what he calls an “infallible plan,” and an unusual one for 1820: the re-attaining of what he calls the “land of promise” through “re-establishing the antient [sic] free republic of the Jews according to the Mosaic law, and rebuilding the City and the Temple.” Shelley, the website further notes, “does not portray Jews as helplessly mourning their lost land, unlike Byron in ‘Hebrew Melodies’ (1815), nor does he present the restoration of the Jewish nation as something for Western nations or Christian sects to take the initiative in promoting. Rather, it is something for Jews to achieve by their own efforts.” The author of “Ozymandias,” in other words, was led by his encounter at the arch, and the logic of his poem, to ponder the possibility of the return of the Jews to the Land of Israel 70 years before Herzl.

In December 2018, a gaffe was committed by the Catholic News Service when it attempted to tweet out an encouraging Hanukkah message. Seeking an online image of a menorah, it tweeted an image of the arch, joining this famous visual of the destruction of Jerusalem with the cheerful message “Happy Hanukkah to those who celebrate!” The News Service immediately apologized, and the tweet was an error, but it nevertheless unintentionally reflected a profound truth: The arch does indeed remind us of what we celebrate on Hanukkah, and how the celebration of Hanukkah throughout the centuries predicted the miracles of our own age.

Shelley’s Ozymandias is an oddly perfect Hanukkah poem, in that the holiday celebrates the ultimate victory of the Jews over ancient foes when it comes to time itself. "Ozymandias” is, therefore, an oddly perfect Hanukkah poem, in that the holiday celebrates the ultimate victory of the Jews over ancient foes when it comes to time itself—and it can be paired with another. Horace Smith, in his competition with Shelley, wrote a poem about Rameses that, in the face of his friend’s masterpiece, has been forgotten. But it, too, is worth remembering and reciting.

We wonder,—and some Hunter may express
Wonder like ours, when thro’ the wilderness
Where London stood, holding the Wolf in chace,
He meets some fragment huge, and stops to guess
What powerful but unrecorded race
Once dwelt in that annihilated place.

Nothing beside remains. But one nation endures.
WHILE MANY MAJOR media outlets such as CNN have recently announced large layoffs, one journalistic beat is still booming. Call it the Disinformation Desk. The Washington Post has created a new position exclusively reporting on “health disinformation,” which includes “the forces promoting scientific and medical disinformation on subjects such as vaccines, drugs, nutritional supplements and healthcare treatments.” National Public Radio hosts an entire “Disinformation Team” whose mission is broad: “From the lies about the 2020 election to the growing influence of anti-vaccine activists, to the enduring influence of climate-change denialism, lies and conspiracy theories have seeped into nearly all aspects of modern-day life, both in the US and around the globe.”

As NPR’s wording demonstrates, the field is dominated by people on the left who are very worried about misinformation on the right. When the New York Times recently featured “6 Podcasts About the Perils of Misinformation,” the topics covered included January 6, incels, anti-vaxxers, and Alex Jones. And while there is plenty of ground to cover on the spread of misinformation on the right, the fledgling field’s partisan focus has already produced some cautionary tales.

Consider two exemplars of this new breed of keyboard warrior: NBC News reporters Ben Collins and Brandy Zadrozny. When executives promoted the two to “senior reporters,” they were credited with creating the “disinformation and misinformation” beat at the network. NBC News executive editor Sally Shin said the pair’s reporting “has served as a wakeup call to the dangers stemming from the dark corners of the Internet.” They often work in tandem.

Like prolific writers of pulp fiction, Zadrozny and Collins have settled on a reliable formula for their work: They examine a shady patch of the Internet, find something terrible, then extrapolate to assert that these fringe views (always conveniently right-wing) are now mainstream and dangerous. This was the template they used to downplay the New York Post’s revelations about Hunter Biden’s laptop in the run-up to the 2020 election. They lumped these in with conspiracy theories involving child trafficking that were making the rounds on right-wing online message boards at the time. The two concluded that the laptop revelations and the conspiracy theories were all “part of a wider effort to smear Hunter Biden and weaken Joe Biden’s presidential campaign, which moved from the fringes of the Internet to more mainstream conservative news outlets.”

Collins did much the same in a piece called “QAnon’s New ‘Plan’? Run for School Board.” He sought to pin the Q label on several people who told him on the record that they didn’t believe QAnon theories but rather were running for school-board elections over concerns about what was happening in public schools.

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It didn’t matter what they said. Collins had his theme, and he was sticking to it.

That was also the formula for recent remarks by Collins about Kanye West’s anti-Semitic statements. Appearing on MSNBC, Collins asserted, without evidence, that unnamed “Republican podcast circles” were to blame for Kanye’s vile remarks: “There are a lot of people who are pushing those same talking points… They don’t agree with the classification that all the Jews are doing this, that Kanye might have some good points, that’s a lot of stuff you hear in the Republican podcast circles right now.”

It is not news that people post crazy things online, and not a surprise that some people unfortunately decide to believe them. What is new is the industry that has emerged to report on it and police it, and the incentive to see crisis and danger around every corner. The language of military conflict crops up regularly when disinformation reporters describe their work. They note that they are on the “front lines” of an “information war,” as if scrolling through 4Chan and appearing on cable television are akin to risking one’s life in battle.

They also frequently rely on the insights of a small number of disinformation “experts” who share their political views and are willing to overlook the harms of disinformation so long as it benefits their side of the aisle. A favorite expert source for Collins and Zadrozy is Renee DiResta, now of the Stanford Internet Observatory but previously of Yonder (once called New Knowledge). DiResta is an odd person to consult, since she was her- 

It is not news that people post crazy things online, and not a surprise that some people unfortunately decide to believe them. What is new is the industry that has emerged to report on it and police it, and the incentive to see crisis and danger around every corner.

self part of a team at Yonder that launched a conscious campaign of disinformation designed to help Democrat Doug Jones defeat Republican Roy Moore in the 2017 Senate special election in Alabama.

Yonder “orchestrated an elaborate ‘false flag’ operation that planted the idea that the Moore campaign was amplified on social media by a Russian botnet,” according to an internal Yonder report obtained by the New York Times. Yonder created thousands of fake Russian Twitter and Facebook accounts supporting Moore, bringing negative national media attention to his campaign. When caught out trying to influence an election in this manner, Yonder claimed it was just an “experiment.” Ironically, Yonder’s employees, including DiResta, had also recently worked with Democrats in the U.S. Senate to author a report on Russian interference in the 2016 election. Evidently when the Russians do it, it’s dangerous election interference, but when Democratic disinformation experts do it in service of defeating Republicans, it’s “research.”

NBC’s star disinformation reporters are not averse to peddling disinformation themselves. Consider one recent example: In the immediate aftermath of a mass shooting that killed five people at an LGBTQ bar in Colorado Springs, Collins appeared on NBC and claimed the shooter had been radicalized by conservative media and its animus toward gay people. Law enforcement at the time had shared no information about the shooter’s motives, but according to Collins, reporters needed to “have a come-to-Jesus moment.” Appearing on MSNBC, he said: “What are you more afraid of? Being on Breitbart for saying that trans people deserve to be alive? Or are you more afraid of waking up to the news of more dead people? I’m more afraid of the dead people.” Despite his supposed fear of more corpses, he found the time to focus most of his remarks on himself, highlighting many of his own previous stories and asking, “What am I doing wrong?” In a two-minute clip he used the word “I” 15 times.

Collins later appeared on Meet the Press and repeated his claim that “the monthslong campaign of targeting trans and gay-rights events and supporters…has been a persistent narrative by the anti-LGBTQ right in the last, you know, six months to the last year” and that “these narratives have taken such hold that they are, in fact, endorsing violence at this point.”

When the shooter appeared in court, however, he claimed to be nonbinary and wanted to be referred to as “Mx”—a disruption of Collins’s tidy narrative. But when Collins was asked on-air in 2019 about a mass shooter in Dayton, Ohio, whom authorities had discovered was an avowed socialist with a public history of supporting liberal politicians such as Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren and expressing anger about the 2016 election (a typical tweet: “I want socialism, and I’ll not wait for the idiots to finally come around to understanding”), he refused to speculate about motive. “More neutral than anything,” he said. “We don’t know if there’s any political affiliation.”

His colleague Zadrozy was also quick to blame conservative media for the Colorado Springs shootings. “I’ve been following this since about March and
April," she said on NBC. “We follow online hate trends, I guess. And since April and March, really the LGBT community has been the main focus of this hatred. If there is a pipeline it starts from some smaller accounts online...[then] moves to the right-wing blogosphere, and then it ends up on Tucker Carlson or it ends up out of a right-wing politician’s mouth. And it’s a really dangerous cycle that does have real-world consequences.”

When the Washington Free Beacon tweeted out a clip of the show with a direct quote from Zadrozny, Zadrozny tweeted back, “This [is] absolutely not true and if you had a shred of legitimacy you’d delete and correct. I won’t hold my breath.” Correct what, exactly? Her own words, recorded on video?

Like many reporters in the disinformation space, Zadrozny dislikes Libs of TikTok, a Twitter account that posts snippets from left-leaning social-media accounts. Libs of TikTok tweeted the following after the shooting: “This organization in Colorado teaches kids how to become drag queens and helps kids ‘safely experience the art of drag on stage,’” with direct links to the organization’s publicity materials. Zadrozny tweeted in response: “Hateful and violent online rhetoric targeting LGBTQ people has been ratcheting up for months. Now, just hours after a deadly mass shooting at #ClubQ, the worst of these hate accounts, LibsOfTikTok is targeting another drag event in Colorado.”

Zadrozny, the mistress of the motte-and-bailey approach to journalism, believes that a Twitter account that posts publicly available information is “targeting” people for violence—which then becomes a justification for censoring it. In this, she echoes the beliefs of many current and former employees of social-media platforms; Twitter’s former head of safety, Yoel Roth, recently said that Twitter accounts such as Libs of TikTok and the Babylon Bee were not only “not funny” but “dangerous” and their existence “contributes to an environment that makes people unsafe in the world.” “Let’s start from a premise that it’s f***ed up,” he said.

This suggests a broader problem with the disinformation beat. These “reporters” see themselves not merely as reporters but as saviors and advocates, and as such they react badly to criticism of their work. In 2020, when Glenn Greenwald questioned the credibility of some reporters on the disinformation beat, Collins chose to respond by posting a lengthy, self-indulgent Twitter thread of his own pieces. He said of himself: “Should I not have talked to all of those doctors back in April and May who told me disinformation was killing their patients and ravaging their ERs? Should I not have discovered the link between the viral anti-mask freakouts and QAnon’s invasion into wellness and religious groups? Should I not have worked the phones for months, then slaughtered my mental health writing these stories?”

If you’ve read Collins’s stories, the answer is: Probably not. Those pieces are heavy on hyperbole and extrapolation and one-sided in their presentation of the complicated problems of our current information ecosystem. His story about anti-masking and wellness groups was largely about one woman who is bipolar and who, in a manic phase in isolation during COVID lockdown, found herself reading some crazy stuff online and then attacking a display of masks at her local Target. Collins manages to be both condescending and portentous about such “wannabe anti-mask influencers,” as he calls them—which comes as a surprise from someone who says that writing about online wellness groups and 4Chan conspiracy theorists “slaughtered” his own mental health.

In early December, these crack disinformation reporters were given an opportunity to revisit one of their most egregious mistakes: covering for the spurious claim that the Hunter Biden laptop story was a Russian disinformation campaign. Twitter’s new owner, Elon Musk, turned over many of the company’s files to the independent journalist Matt Taibbi, who then tweeted out details of Twitter’s internal efforts to suppress the New York Post’s story. Collins immediately tweeted, dismissively, that Taibbi was merely doing “PR work for the richest man in the world.” Whatever one can say about Matt Taibbi, and there are many uncomplimentary things one could say about his often-wild work, the idea that he’s a billionaire’s shill is among the most preposterous.

At a time when trust in media as an institution remains historically low, anointing a small cadre of reporters as the judges of what is and is not disinformation is risky at best—especially given their own propensity for glib snark and witlessness combined with their frequent descents into sodden self-pity.

Worse still, those who have been tasked with reporting on the many ways misinformation and disinformation are shared among the masses have decided that it is their job to censor. Their logic is this: The only way to save you from yourselves and the gullibility from which you all suffer is to prevent you from saying and seeing things we have determined are not in the nation’s best interest (as we define it).

In the heady early days of Silicon Valley, its boosters frequently claimed that “information wants to be free.” Today, as the Hunter Biden laptop and other stories demonstrate, almost all mainstream media journalists on the “disinformation” beat think information should instead serve their agreed-upon narrative or be removed from view. Anything less is “dangerous.”

Commentary

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GOPocalypse
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By John Podhoretz

The defeat of the Republican senatorial candidate Herschel Walker in a December runoff election in Georgia closes the circle on the most decisive rejection of the influence of any individual politician in our lifetimes. That politician is not Herschel Walker but Donald Trump. The question that now faces the Republican Party is whether its toxic romance with Trump will poison the well for the GOP for a generation or whether it can, as they say in the literature of addiction and recovery, break the cycle of abuse and begin to heal.

What happened in Georgia from Election Night in November 2020 until the runoff Walker lost in December 2022 was the perfect distillation of what happened across the country during the same period inside the party Trump has commandeered for his own personal use. Once the election results on November 8, 2020, showed Trump had lost to Joe Biden in Georgia by 12,000 votes, he began to create a narrative according to which the state’s electors had been stolen from him by Democratic chicanery through illicit early and mail-in ballots.

That narrative had the effect of convincing gullible Republican voters choked by disappointment and still sick with love for Trump that there was no way the January 2021 runoff to decide the state’s two Senate races could possibly be fair. As a result, nearly 500,000 voters who had come out for the general election in November stayed home when the runoff came around. An Atlanta Journal-Constitution study found that “the most precipitous declines occurred among Republican voters.” The falloff was steepest in places, like Valdosta County, where Trump had held rallies nominally in support of the Republican Senate candidates, in which he spent his time railing against the supposedly monstrous injustice that had been done him.

John Podhoretz is the editor of Commentary.
In the November 2020 general election, incumbent Republican senator David Perdue led Democratic challenger Jon Ossoff by 1.8 points. In the January 2021 runoff, Perdue lost by almost 2 points, a nearly 4 percent shift toward the Democrats. The evidence was plain: Trump had single-handedly depressed GOP turnout and thereby cost Republicans control of the Senate. This proved to be an utterly calamitous turn of events for conservative governance, since it gave Joe Biden and the Democrats the means and ability to pass $6 trillion in new spending between January 2021 and November 2022.

The GOP’s inability to generate a wave election was most evident in the fact that Democrats succeeded in actually gaining one seat in the Senate.

Trump’s destructive behavior on this score alone should have been enough to demonstrate to rational Republicans that he had become nothing but poison—but it wasn’t, for various reasons. And Trump was hardly done with Georgia. In fact, the extent to which Trump would play a key role in the 2022 midterm elections became horrifyingly clear early in 2021 through his continuing interest, or perhaps his obsession, with the Peach State.

First, Trump was determined to see the sitting Republican governor and secretary of state go down to defeat in the 2022 primaries as punishment for foiling his ludicrous conspiracy scheme to “find” 11,000 ballots that could have flipped the state’s electoral votes into his column. (Not that it would have mattered; if Georgia had become a Trump state, Biden would still have won the Electoral College, 290–248.)

Second, he capriciously and vaingloriously decided he wanted Herschel Walker—a 60-year-old man who had never run for anything but had played for Trump’s team in the United States Football League in the mid-1980s after winning the Heisman Trophy at the University of Georgia—to be the Republican candidate for senate.

And how did that all turn out?

When it came to punishing Governor Brian Kemp and Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, Trump proved to be a paper tiger. He recruited David Perdue—the man who lost his Senate seat due to Trump’s feckless assaults on the electoral system—to run against Kemp in the May 2022 primary. The result: Kemp beat Perdue by an astounding 51 points. At the same time, the Renfield-like Representative Jody Hice, who gave up a safe House seat to do his master’s bidding and try to unseat Raffensperger, lost the primary by 20 points.

In that same primary, Walker ran for the Senate seat in Georgia all but unopposed. Even though nearly everyone in Republican politics thought Walker’s candidacy was a terrible idea, it would have been a declaration of war against Trump if Mitch McConnell or anyone else had dared suggest there might be better choices than Walker in the crucial and winnable Georgia Senate race. And so, by October 2021, McConnell was offering a warm endorsement of Walker, who had once claimed to have multiple personalities. “Herschel is the only one who can unite the party, defeat Senator Warnock, and help us take back the Senate,” McConnell said.

Every clause of that sentence proved to be wrong. The person who “united the party” was not Walker but Kemp, who won reelection by 8 points on Election Night as Walker was running a point behind his rival, Raphael Warnock. Walker did not “defeat Senator Warnock.” The Democrat not only ended Election Night in November with a one-point lead; he won the runoff by three.

Nor did Republicans “take back the Senate,” though in this case you can’t actually blame Walker’s nightmare of a candidacy. By the time the Georgia runoff had taken place, Republicans could not have taken back the Senate in any case because other Trump-endorsed candidates had already blown that chance for McConnell in November—despite running in the most favorable political environment for the GOP in 42 years. That’s not to say Walker’s defeat was meaningless. It has ensured Democrats will have enough power with their one-seat majority to end the Senate filibuster at will. Great work!

So that’s what Trump did in Georgia.

Now let’s take a look at what he did elsewhere.

The GOP’s inability to generate a wave election was most evident in the fact that Democrats succeeded in actually gaining one seat in the Senate. Why did that happen? The answer is multicausal, but the fact remains that Blake Masters in Arizona, Mehmet Oz in Pennsylvania, and Adam Laxalt in Nevada were all endorsed and supported by Trump (and New Hampshire’s Don Bolduc effectively ran as Trump)—and they all lost. In the conventional wave election that observers expected 2022 would be, most of those seats would have tipped the GOP’s way. But in a conventional wave...
Because Trump continued to bigfoot the GOP in pursuit of his personal agenda, he was every bit the subject of the 2022 election that he had been in 2020.
The Republican base is willing to go along with the idea because it believes that the Democrats and liberals are so perfidious, they would have stolen it if they could have—and so, even if they didn’t, they deserve the blame for wanting to.

These two bases do what bases do. They’re neck-deep in politics. They live it, breathe it, and they staff it. They make up the people who drum up support for candidates in contested primaries, and then they vote in them. Trump’s successful seduction allowed him to shift their usual approach in primaries away from promoting candidates they might think would be best for the causes they supported and more toward candidates whose primary focus was their passionate fealty to Trump.

These bases dominate the party’s internal decision-making. But they do not dominate its numbers. According to CNN’s Harry Enten, something like 22 million Republicans turned out to vote in the 2022 primaries. That’s 40 percent of the overall number of people who voted Republican in the general election (around 55 million). Who makes up the other 60 percent? That’s the Republican electorate, combined with independents who are Republican in all but name.

All things being equal, people in the Republican electorate will vote for a Republican every time. If they don’t, they will stay home. Or, in some extreme cases, they will refuse to vote for anyone even though they show up at the polls. That’s how Herschel Walker lost. On the same night that Brian Kemp got 53.4 percent of the vote in the Georgia governor’s race, Walker got 48.5 percent. Five percent of those who voted for Kemp would not vote for Walker, and only a relative handful split their vote and went for Warnock. Most left their selection blank or voted for the libertarian candidate (who got 2 percent).

Addressing the subject of the Trump craziness head-on before the Democrats take full advantage of it—this is the needle the GOP will have to thread.

That pool of non-base Republican voters, that 60 percent—they are the key to the Republican Party’s salvation. Motivating them, involving them, and using their commonsense approach to politics will be the challenge for Republicans who understand that moving beyond Trump is the only way to save their party.

This is the only way forward if the GOP is to contest on an even playing field for the hearts and minds of Americans who do not believe in the increasingly radical Democratic agenda but cannot stomach the Republican craziness. Addressing the subject of the Trump craziness head-on before Biden and the Democrats take full advantage of it for their own ends—this is the needle the GOP will have to thread.

When the intentionally shocking radio personality Howard Stern exploded on the airwaves in New York City in the early 1980s, it was said that audience members who liked him tuned in for an hour a day—while those who said they hated him listened twice as long. Stern had hit upon a brilliant commercial formula. When your job is to provide content for the sole purpose of holding people’s attention between the paid ads, it doesn’t matter whether people are listening with rage or with love—only that they’re listening.

In almost every respect, Donald Trump brought Stern’s act to American politics, and it worked because he shared Stern’s talent for sucking up attention. Like Stern, he has a rare ability to occupy the thoughts of those who hate him even more than those who love him—and, due in large measure to that hatred, to receive even more love from his fans since they are often driven by passionate detestation of the people who passionately detest Trump.

Trump has weaponized, and harnessed, and addicted people to, and himself become addicted to, the unparalleled attention he generates. For the better part of eight years, he has completely dominated our national conversation. That could have been of great use to him if he had had a larger set of policies to promote, but his dominance is not due to substance, and therefore its utility was limited merely to the garnering of attention itself. For him, issues and ideas are like cornstarch in an otherwise spicy but insubstantial soup, stirred into the pot to thicken it some.

That is why the grand intellectual project to build an agenda around him—call it “American Greatness,” or MAGA, or National Conservatism, or whatever portmanteau might be pleasing to you—has produced nothing of substance and is now fast descending into a low-comedy civil war fought with pop guns being waged on a narcissistic battlefield of small differences. However nobly intended it might have been, the effort was doomed to fail because you can’t build a foundation on quicksand.

There is a crucial difference between Trump and Stern: Politics is not the stuff that goes on between ads. It’s the most important thing we do together as Ameri-
cans—even if it has been degraded over time by the slop-over of celebrity culture, and even if the two parties no longer seem to represent the views of a majority of their members but rather the vocal minorities in their coalitions. And the larger American electorate takes its responsibilities seriously. That is why, in the Republican Party especially, that larger electorate needs to be brought into the process earlier.

It needs to be convinced it must play in the primaries so that it’s not stuck at the end with the unpalatable choices made for it by the GOP’s red-hot center and its addled base.

How? Surely the techniques that have led to the remarkable increase in the size of the national electorate over the past 20 years can provide a guide. Remember that from 1972 until 2004, we never saw voter turnout in presidential years exceed 60 percent, but it has hovered there and spiked as high as 67 percent in the five presidential elections since. Midterm election turnout in 2018 was an astonishing 118 million—just a few percentage points off the 2016 presidential numbers. And while it fell to around 105 million in 2022, that’s still 20 million more than voted in the 2014 midterms.

Americans have joined the national electorate in the first two decades of the 21st century in a way they didn’t in the last third of the 20th because they have learned that the stakes are high.

For Republican voters who have every reason to worry that the GOP is going to repeat the same mistakes that led to the results in the last five elections—by which I mean the 2018 and the 2022 midterms, as well as the 2020 general election and the two Georgia runoffs in 2021 and 2022—the stakes could not be higher.

Recent history suggests that when a political party appears to lose touch with the general population as it pursues the demands and interests of a less palatable minority, the long-term effects can be ruinous. The Democratic Party took a sharp left turn after 1968 following an election its moderate presidential candidate lost very narrowly—and as a result, Democrats held the presidency in only four of the subsequent 24 years and ceased their long-standing ownership of the national ideological agenda for a generation. That could be the Republican fate for a generation if the party remains in the thrall of Trump and whoever follows in his footsteps.

The work that must be done to move the traditional Republican voter—who believes in limited government, free markets, social order, strength at home and abroad, enduring values, and American exceptionalism—from the periphery to the center of the political conversation must begin now if conservatives and the country’s conservative party are to stave off the GOPocalypse.
The Triumph of Trump’s Amateurs

The Abraham Accords happened because the foreign-policy grandees weren’t in charge

By Jonathan S. Tobin

The list of memoirs by those involved in American Middle East diplomacy during the five and a half decades since the Six-Day War features a diverse array of officials who served in both Democratic and Republican administrations. Their books reflect the fact that every American president during that time, from Lyndon Johnson to Donald Trump, attempted at one point or another to cut the Gordian knot of the Arab–Israeli conflict. And the publishing industry has over the years shown an insatiable appetite for books written by these figures in which they recount their almost always unsuccessful endeavors—with only a few limited exceptions, such as Henry Kissinger’s negotiation of cease-fire and forced-separation agreements after the Yom Kippur War or the Carter administration’s subsequent role in finalizing the peace between Israel and Egypt.

The four memoirs published this year by former Trump-administration officials involved in Middle East diplomacy might be glibly dismissed as just another bunch to be added to the remainder pile. But

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these books—by Senior White House adviser Jared Kushner, Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, Special Representative for International Negotiations Jason Greenblatt, and Friedman aide Aryeh Lightstone—are different from their predecessors.* They reflect the fact that, although none of these men had any Middle East expertise before being tapped by Trump to serve him, they can all claim to be part of a genuine foreign-policy triumph of a kind that eluded more experienced and far more celebrated foreign-policy grandees.

Their signature achievement is the 2020 Abraham Accords. The accords began with an agreement between the United Arab Emirates and Israel to normalize relations and led to three more countries—Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan—joining the deal. This broke a decades-long logjam during which the countries in the region were held hostage by Palestinian intransigence and a Western fixation about how to create peace.

Even Kissinger’s and Carter’s successes were, at least in the minds of those involved, essentially limited, since they fell short of achieving a wider peace that would eliminate what they seemed to think was America’s biggest problem in the region: the Arab and Muslim world’s resentment over U.S. support for Israel, and its anger about the lack of a Palestinian Arab state. The American foreign-policy establishment called the shots on Middle East issues in every White House and State Department up until January 2017. And its members believed that the conflict between Jews and Arabs over possession of the tiny strip of land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River was the key to getting Arabs and Muslims to drop their hostility to the United States.

The Middle East experts who served in each of those administrations, as well as those who filled Washington’s think tanks and mainstream and elite media, shared the belief that there was only one way to achieve that goal. They pushed a policy that would exert the right amount of pressure on Israel to cede the land it had won in a defensive war in 1967. This, they said, would result in a Palestinian state that would make everyone in the region happy.

That was particularly true of those in the administrations of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama in the period following the 1993 Oslo Accords, which provided a framework for the establishment of such a state. The American officials involved in the efforts to bring those agreements to fruition held varying estimations of how much pressure to put on Israel—along with some guarantees for its security—to attain that goal. But they did not differ on the question of whether sovereignty for the Palestinians was crucial to advancing U.S. interests in the region. And they were equally united in thinking that the land-for-peace formula that was the conceit of the Oslo mindset was the only way to make it happen.

And they all failed. In their memoirs, none of these leading lights—former secretaries of state Warren Christopher, Madeleine Albright, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, Hillary Clinton, and John Kerry, as well as numerous lesser officials tasked with fixing the Middle East, such as Aaron David Miller, Dennis Ross, Martin Indyk, and Daniel Kurtzer—display any doubt about their investment in the basic Oslo formula. Like almost all of the experts who produced literature about Middle East diplomacy in the past three decades, these notable figures worshipped at the altar of land-for-peace, and they never took a moment to wonder whether they might have been idolators kneeling before a false god.

That is the context in which the books by Kushner, Friedman, Greenblatt, and Lightstone must be read. Though these works were greeted with either silence or mockery by those who habitually review books about the Middle East—the New York Times books section ignored three of them and skewered Kushner’s—historians will find them startlingly useful as they try to decipher why the “peace process” failed while the Abraham Accords process succeeded.

DONALD TRUMP’S election campaign and unlikely Electoral College victory had already broken numerous precedents. That continued...
once he took office, as he chose relatives and personal associates for major policy jobs. Son-in-law Kushner, bankruptcy lawyer Friedman, and personal legal counsel Greenblatt all fell into this category. From the moment they were anointed, Kushner and Friedman became the subjects of controversy and the recipients of a blizzard of abusive criticism. And all three were Orthodox Jews.

While Jews had previously filled important roles in the State Department and the National Security Council and had even served as ambassadors to Israel (as was the case with Indyk and Kurtzer), they had all been ardent believers in the myth of land for peace and the necessity of “saving Israel from itself.” Trump’s personal circle came from a different sector of American Jewry: pro-Israel activists who believed that the foreign-policy establishment had wronged Israel and had led the Palestinians to believe they could continue to cling to their delusions about destroying the Jewish state without facing significant pushback or penalties from Washington. A key part of the narratives of the Trump deputies is the story of how they struggled to overcome not just the more conventional appointees to the administration’s policy team—such as the first secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, and the first secretary of defense, James Mattis—but the vast army of permanent foreign-service officers and bureaucrats who regarded them as hopeless amateurs. Or worse, as Zionist ideologues with dual loyalties who should have no place working in the federal government.

Kushner’s *Breaking History* is largely a defense of his role in Trump’s administration, and it’s not always persuasive. But the parts about the Middle East have the ring of truth. Greenblatt’s *In the Path of Abraham* is intensely personal and has a pleasing sincerity regarding his struggles, occasional victories against the bureaucracy and Palestinian intransigence, and breakthroughs with Arab states. But it suffers from the fact that Greenblatt left the administration at the end of 2019 before the Trump peace plan was unveiled and the Abraham Accords came into being.

Friedman and Greenblatt came to Trump through his business dealings. Friedman was one of New York’s most successful bankruptcy attorneys and had served the real-estate mogul in various cases. Greenblatt was an in-house Trump Organization attorney. Both had earned Trump’s trust and, like Kushner, his respect for sticking to their Orthodox beliefs even when it meant stopping in the middle of crucial business negotiations to observe the Sabbath or holidays. The three men tell stories about how the famously callous and imperious Trump supported their religious observances and came to understand Israel and Zionism through them. Even discounting their desire to portray their boss in a good light, the portrait here contradicts the liberal narrative of Trump as a boorish anti-Semite. Seeing the former president through the prism of this coterie of Jewish associates, and considering that he saw American Jews through their perspective as well, helps explain Trump’s inability to understand why most American Jews are politically liberal and don’t make support for Israel their overriding concern.

All wound up in struggles with Tillerson and to a lesser extent with Mattis over control of foreign policy in the Middle East. It turned out these were fights that those seemingly more important figures were doomed to lose—not so much because of their inability to shake off establishment conventional wisdom but because they didn’t understand Trump as well as their amateur opponents did.

What is often forgotten in the praise for the
Abraham Accords is that Trump came into office ready to chase the white whale of peace with the Palestinians, just like every other president. His belief in his skill as a dealmaker knew no bounds, and he thought that the age-old problem of Palestinians and Israelis would yield to his prowess as if it were a Manhattan real-estate transaction. He could, he thought, produce what he called the “ultimate deal.”

The difference between this vain ambition and that of previous presidents was not so much Trump's ego or his general lack of knowledge about the situation. It was that his Middle East team had a far more realistic understanding of the situation than the experts who had preceded them.

Kushner, Greenblatt, and Friedman did not all see the problem exactly in the same light. All were pro-Israel. Kushner's views were more centrist. Though he writes about Benjamin Netanyahu staying in his room when his family hosted him on a visit to New Jersey, he was more in tune with the prime minister's chief rival, Benny Gantz. For their part, Greenblatt and especially Friedman had strong sympathies for Netanyahu and the Israeli right. Yet, as they all write, each understood that the problem with past peace attempts was the Oslo mindset and a failure to understand that the Palestinians were still acting on the conviction that sooner or later the international community and the Americans would ditch Israel and hand them complete victory. It wouldn't take them long to help educate Trump about the Palestinians.

Prior to joining the administration, Friedman had helped raise funds for West Bank settlements and had nearly had his appointment blocked because of the incendiary language he used to describe American Jews who are highly critical of Israel (he called the left-wing lobby group J Street “kapos”—a reference to Jewish collaborators with the Nazis, an attack he had to retract and apologize for). And as this history might suggest, he was a U.S. ambassador to Israel like no other.

Every previous envoy sent to the Tel Aviv embassy regarded himself as an American pro-consul whose job was to give orders to the leaders of a client state. Friedman had other ideas. He was determined to right what he saw as the wrongs of past U.S. policies toward Israelis. And he knew, with the help of those such as Kushner and Greenblatt working in the White House, how to do it.

As president, Trump was initially fooled into believing that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas's claims that he wanted peace were genuine. But Friedman, who was the key player in every one of Trump's historic pro-Israel decisions, helped disabuse him by breaking protocol and ensuring that his former client watched a video, compiled by Israelis, of Abbas's statements fomenting anti-Israel and anti-Semitic violence. He also made Trump aware of the Palestinian Authority's "pay for slay" scheme, by which terrorists who injured or killed Israelis received salaries and pensions paid to their families based on the level of violence committed. Friedman's educational efforts infuriated the State Department but largely dislodged Trump's illusions about Palestinian intentions.

This was best illustrated with Trump's startling decision to authorize the relocation of the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, with the implicit recognition of Israel's capital that it signaled. Every other president and his aides had bought into the conventional wisdom that such a decision would set the region on fire—which meant the embassy had remained in Tel Aviv despite a law passed by Congress in November 1995 and signed by Bill Clinton mandating its relocation to Jerusalem.

In the White House, Kushner and Greenblatt were quick to advance an argument that Netanyahu had been trying to make to the Americans for years: Much of the Arab world was far more interested in the threat from Iran than the complaints and ambitions of the Palestinians. The vast experience of Kushner, Greenblatt, and Friedman in real estate helped them understand the position of the Palestinians in a way their predecessors could not. They saw the Palestinian position as the moral equivalent to that of an owner of a depressed property that had been intentionally run down and whose value was declining.

If the Palestinians wanted a deal with Israel—and there was little reason to think they did—they'd have to take less than what had been offered under the more generous terms of Israeli and American governments in the past. What the Palestinians needed was a cold dose of reality, and Trump's amateurs were ready to serve it up with respect to Jerusalem even if Tillerson and Mattis were not.
Friedman's dramatic account of the meeting in the White House Situation Room on November 27, 2017, in which the issue of Jerusalem was finally decided, provides a sense of the difficulties involved for Trump's amateurs. Tillerson's and Mattis's objections carried weight with Trump, and White House Chief of Staff Kelly ensured that only Friedman would be there to oppose them. Kushner and Greenblatt were not invited so as to make clear that the decision would not be made at “the behest of three Orthodox Jews.”

Yet if the “adults” thought the odds were stacked in their favor, they were wrong. After Tillerson had read a briefing paper prepared for him by staff, Friedman embarrassed the secretary by pointing out that Tillerson mistakenly claimed Jerusalem was reunited in 1996 rather than in the 1967 Six-Day War and had also omitted the fact that a U.S. law passed by Congress in 1995 had already declared the city to be the undivided capital of Israel. For his part, Mattis claimed that Israel's capital had to be Tel Aviv because that is where its defense ministry is located; Friedman’s brilliant riposte was that by Mattis's logic, America's capital should be in Virginia with the Pentagon.

More important, Friedman played Trump perfectly, telling him that if he was the tough and unique leader he claimed to be rather than a typical politician who breaks his promises as every previous president had done with respect to Jerusalem, he’d have to agree to the move. The gambit worked perfectly. Trump made the fateful decision and approved other actions that led to the establishment of a new permanent embassy in Jerusalem and recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. The title of Friedman's book is a reference to the sledgehammer he used to help inaugurate an archeological park in Jerusalem’s City of David—but it also serves as a useful metaphor for Friedman's effective work in helping to secure American support for Jewish rights in Israel's capital.

The embassy move set the tone for Trump's tilt toward Israel, but, at least until the fall of 2020, the end goal of all these efforts was to prepare the way for a peace plan with the Palestinians and not with Arab nations. The Abraham Accords happened in no small measure because the Trump team believed in an “outside-in” approach in which pressure from the Arab world would cause the Palestinians to see reason.

When not battling with the permanent foreign-policy bureaucracy, Kushner and Greenblatt were establishing relationships with the Gulf States. Their diplomats made it clear that these countries regarded Israel as a tacit ally against Iran rather than an enemy, as well as a potential First World economic trading partner.

Trump's team played on this sentiment, even as they thought that simple pragmatism might compel the Palestinians to abandon revanchist fantasies and seek avenues for international investment. That was the basis of a “Peace Through Prosperity” plan that the amateurs worked on for a large part of their first years in the administration.

Abbas never seriously considered the proposal. He refused to accept that time was actually on Israel's side. The Jewish state was growing wealthier and starting to be seen by the Arab world as a strategic asset against Iran. There were also the facts on the ground, which is to say, Jewish communities in the West Bank had become so large that their removal was no longer feasible or politically possible. Abbas ignored that Kushner and Greenblatt's plan involved the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state and Israeli surrender of some territory in the West Bank (though not nearly so much as the Palestinians had been offered in proposals in 2000, 2001, and 2008).

Though the plan for a Palestinian state was ready in the spring of 2019, the successive stalemates in Israel's Knesset elections meant that it had to be put on hold until January 2020. It was then that the key conflict between Trump's amateurs erupted.

Friedman and Netanyahu believed that the plan allowed Israel to extend its law over the parts of the West Bank designated as “Area C” by the Oslo Accords—a region where Jewish settlements existed and relatively few Arabs lived. Kushner, who had by this time grown weary of the Israeli prime minister's hard-bargaining tactics, was outraged by what he thought was a breach of the terms the two countries had agreed to. Kushner believed that the annexation of Area C could happen only much later, with specific American approval in the context of a final agreement.

Friedman writes of this as a misunderstanding while Kushner still considers it to be evidence of Netanyahu's untrustworthiness. With his son-in-law...
egging him on, Trump expressed outrage about Netanyahu’s willingness to exploit the situation for his country’s advantage. Ultimately, Netanyahu had to back down; Friedman was also bruised by the dispute.

And yet the conflict served an unexpectedly creative purpose. It provided the leverage the United Arab Emirates needed to justify its decision to normalize relations with Israel. In the Israeli newspaper Yediot Achronot, Yousef al-Otaiba, the UAE ambassador to the United Nations, published an op-ed blasting the annexation idea. While ostensibly critical of Israel, the column offered the possibility that the Arab world would open its arms to the Jewish state—because putting off annexation indefinitely would provide a rationale for normalization by Arab nations that were eager for an excuse to ditch the Palestinians.

Kushner and his chief aide, Avi Berkowitz, with the enthusiastic support of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (who had replaced Tillerson in 2018), went to work securing what would become the Abraham Accords. The UAE went first, but the Kushner-Berkowitz team also got Bahrain and then Morocco (at the cost of American recognition for its occupation of the former Spanish Sahara) to join in.

The establishment of Israeli diplomatic relations with these countries was by any objective standard a historic achievement. It added to the total of Arab nations that recognized Israel after more than seven decades of the Jewish state’s existence; only Egypt and Jordan, both former direct combatants in the wars against Israel, had normalized relations before this point. Even more important, as Kushner’s book makes clear, the normalization was also done with the acquiescence of Saudi Arabia. The accords demolished the claims that peace with the Arab world could only follow a resolution of the conflict with the Palestinians.

Trump’s amateurs proved that John Kerry’s notorious 2015 answer of “no, no, no, no,” when he was asked about the possibility of a wider peace, had been a function of the foreign-policy establishment’s tunnel vision and not a reflection of diplomatic reality. It provided the template for future peace agreements along the same lines with other Arab nations and could, in theory, prod a new generation of Palestinian leaders to seek an agreement with Israel and the United States that would be similar to the Peace Through Prosperity formula.

That the amateurs had arrived at this point by an indirect route, and only after years of struggle both inside the U.S. government and in futile attempts to engage the Palestinians, doesn’t detract from their achievement. But so deep is the contempt for Trump and Netanyahu within the ranks of the Washington establishment, and so entrenched are their preconceived notions about the Middle East, that not even the reality of the Abraham Accords and their significance are enough to change minds.

With the same cast of characters who so conspicuously failed in the Middle East under Bill Clinton and especially Barack Obama now back in control of American foreign policy, the familiar refrains about Israel needing to make concessions to encourage the Palestinians are once again in vogue. Though the Palestinian reputation for intransigence has made it difficult for even President Joe Biden’s team to find any meaningful way to appease Abbas and Company, Trump’s successor has failed to follow up on the Abraham Accords, thus squandering the opportunity for more peace deals and a united front against Iranian aggression and nuclear threats.

That is why the four books by Trump’s amateurs deserve to be read—and, despite their pedestrian renderings of everyday diplomacy (and Kushner’s deeply unattractive efforts at revenge and score-settling), understood as a useful guide to how Washington can break its addiction to policies that have been tried and proven to fail. Their authors may suffer from the opprobrium that the educated classes attach to anyone connected to Trump. But their successes deserve to be remembered and honored, and they stand as a lesson to all who will follow in their footsteps.

Commentary
From the Halls of Montezuma to the Halls of Central High

Military veterans are ‘unqualified’ to be teachers. Just like everyone else.

By Robert Pondiscio

When you hit your knees tonight, thank the God to whom you pray that we don’t train air-traffic controllers the way we train teachers, or turn their first years on the job into a perverse hazing ritual at the expense of the innocent. “What? You think you’re the first person to run a plane into a mountain?” disdainful veterans would tell tearful rookies in the staff lounge of the control tower, spinning tales of their own early, fatal mishaps. “Don’t worry, you’ll learn. Look, no one can do this job straight from college.”

Not that anyone tried to prepare them. If air-traffic-control school looked like ed school, course readings and class discussions would dwell on the structural inequities of air travel. If you were an air-traffic-control

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student, you’d write papers about the lingering effects of colonialism on state-run airlines. The point of your degree program wouldn’t be vocational training but the development of your personal philosophy of transportation. Everything else you’d learn on the job once you became licensed. What’s important, you see, is that you view the profession “through a critical lens” and demonstrate your commitment to social justice. “Aero Mexico, you’re cleared for takeoff. American? Circle the field and reflect on your privilege. At this airport, we land planes for equity.”

In too many ed schools, would-be teachers feel as if they’re attending elementary school, not preparing to teach it. In a 2022 Wall Street Journal op-ed, a teacher named Daniel Buck described making Black Lives Matter friendship bracelets, attending classes that sound like group-therapy sessions, and completing assignments—in graduate school—consisting of acrostic poems and rap videos. This is not a recent phenomenon. I still have the vocabulary picture book that I made in ed school 20 years ago of construction paper, glue, and pictures clipped from magazines. I got an A each time I submitted it. In three different classes.

Ask a teacher whether I’m exaggerating about the lack of intellectual rigor and job preparedness. Better yet, ask the people who hire teachers. Frederick M. Hess of the American Enterprise Institute points out that a mere 7 percent of school-district superintendents, and only 13 percent of principals, think certification guarantees that a teacher “has what it takes” to be effective in the classroom. “One must wonder whether costly, less than respected preparation programs disuade many who might otherwise be inclined to consider a teaching career,” Hess writes.

This brings us to Florida governor Ron DeSantis and a plan he announced in the summer of 2022 to address his state’s educator shortage by allowing retired military-service personnel to become teachers. According to the plan, honorably discharged veterans with four or more years of service and a minimum of 60 college credits are now eligible for a five-year temporary teaching certificate while they matriculate toward a bachelor’s degree—an idea not very different from Teach for America or other “alternative-certification” pathways into the classroom. Teachers’-union President Randi Weingarten sprang into action, declaring the idea insulting to teachers who have worked hard to obtain advanced degrees and certifications. The idea that anyone can teach, sniffed the ideological chameleon Diane Ravitch, shows “utter contempt for the teaching profession.”

In fact, if anyone is insulting teachers and showing them utter contempt, it’s ed schools, which wield monopoly power over teacher licensure and have little incentive to change cash-cow programs that are poorly regarded within the field, and even on their own campuses.

There’s no denying that our schools of education are citadels of cartoonish wokeness and have been for decades. But their greater sin—by far—is their refusal to take seriously their obligation to ensure that teachers are ready to the degree humanly possible for classroom competence. New data from the long-running National Assessment of Educational Progress released in the fall show that test scores plummeted during Covid, wiping away 20 years of gains in math and reading scores. Ed-school follies, never cute or funny, are now simply no longer tolerable.

In 2002, when I interviewed at the South Bronx public school where I would spend the next five years teaching, I surprised the principal by telling her I wanted to teach fifth grade. These were the oldest kids in the school and from her perspective the hardest to teach, since at least a third of them were one or more years behind, entering adolescence, and hard to handle. I was less concerned about behavior management than keeping a secret that made the thought of teaching kindergarten or first grade terrifying: I had no idea how (and certainly no training) to teach children to read.

In retrospect, my fears were misplaced. “Parents who proudly bring their children to school on the first day of kindergarten are making a big mistake: They assume that their child’s teacher has been taught how to teach reading. They haven’t,” writes Mark Seidenberg, a cognitive neuroscientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in his 2017 book Language at the Speed of Sight. “The principal function of schools of education is to socialize prospective teachers into an ideology—a set of beliefs about children, the nature of education, and the teacher’s role.” Kate Walsh, the former head of the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) and a long-time ed-school Torquemada, has described this as “not unlike the transformation of Pinocchio from pup-

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**Commentary**
pet to real boy,” with ed schools aiming to “confront and expunge the prejudices of teacher candidates, particularly those related to race, class, language, and culture.”

LIKE AN OYSTER turning an irritating grain of sand into a pearl (or a scab over a wound, if you prefer), teachers have begun to rebel. The counterrevolution began in 2018, when a journalist for American Public Media, Emily Hanford, began a series of podcasts on why children aren’t being taught to read. “The prevailing approaches to reading instruction in American schools are inconsistent with basic things scientists have discovered about how children learn to read,” she reported. This wasn’t a sudden development. Among researchers, the reading wars had ended long ago in a rout favoring explicit instruction in phonics. “Most teachers nationwide are not being taught reading science because many deans and faculty in colleges of education either don’t know the science or dismiss it. As a result of their intransigence, millions of kids have been set up to fail,” explained Hanford, whose sympathetic reporting hit like a hammer through glass. It was an Emperor’s New Clothes moment for beleaguered teachers, who have long been less sinners than sinned against. They wrote letters to their ed schools (I wrote one myself), calling out their lousy preparation. Lawmakers in dozens of states introduced measures that would require schools to use evidence-based methods for teaching children to read. There’s even a Facebook group for teachers called “Science of Reading: What I Should Have Learned in College.” It has more than 175,000 members.

Nearly 400 veterans had signed up for DeSantis’s program, but none had been hired in the area’s largest school district despite a larger number of vacancies. This brings us back to DeSantis’s plan to make it easier for military veterans and former first responders to become teachers. A local news report in Jacksonville, Florida, in the fall found that nearly 400 veterans have signed up for the program, but none had been hired in the area’s largest school districts despite an even larger number of vacancies. Local teachers’ union leaders continue to insist that the root cause of Florida’s teacher shortage is low pay and prestige. “You can’t just throw a warm body in a classroom, that’s not the answer,” huffed one union chief. “My job is to look out for the students and those educating the students.”

Isn’t it pretty to think so? It’s hard to deride efforts to open up the teaching profession as seeking only a warm body when the only thing a master’s degree in education has been shown to raise is not test scores but a teacher’s salary. “The fact that teachers with master’s degrees are no more effective in the classroom, on average, than their colleagues without an advanced degree is one of the most consistent findings in education research,” noted Matthew M. Chingos in a report by the Brookings Institution. This makes the idea of pressing veterans and first responders into service as teachers sound less than absurd.

Leslye Arsht, whose 30-year career in education includes working in Iraq in 2003 on a civilian team that helped to rebuild the Iraqi Ministry of Education, once spent months trying to figure out how the military succeeds where schools often fail in taking ordinary kids from every kind of environment and turning them into responsible adults. She tells a story about speaking with senior officials and military brass who mostly mumbled or maintained a sphinxlike silence in response to her queries. Finally, a staffer in Accessions, which represents the culture and personalities of each of the Army branches, “put his hand over his mouth and whispered, ‘It’s basic training.’” Basic training makes demands physically and mentally, but the critical factor is that every recruit starts with a clean slate. “You take away all the black marks and bruises,” Arsht explains. “It doesn’t matter where you came from, or where you think you’re going. It’s all about now, and what you need to know to be successful.” Ten weeks later, you emerge having learned and practiced discipline and teamwork, and with a sense of purpose. You’re part of something bigger. Now you’re on a career track, training and learning what you need to succeed. “You can see and you feel the progress you are making,” Arsht
explains. “That is not what happens in K–12.”
Or in ed school.
Consider that the typical public-school teacher is likely drawn to the classroom because he or she felt comfortable and successful there as a kid, even in mediocre school settings. The typical grunt’s experience was probably the opposite. The military was his first encounter with a functional learning environment. This is not to suggest that schools should be run like Parris Island, but the self-discipline, adaptability, sense of mission over self, and ability to work under highly stressful conditions that military service impresses upon soldiers makes intuitive sense when thinking about the qualities you look for in a teacher who is likely to succeed and stick around—particularly if what it takes to be an effective teacher is learned on the job anyway. Throwing unprepared young women and men into classrooms isn’t something new or novel. We do it every September. But if you ask me who I’d rather have in front of my child’s classroom, a teacher fresh out of the Marine Corps or one out of Middlebury, I’ll take my chances with the jarhead.
Is it possible, even likely, that DeSantis’s plan is more about politics than improving outcomes for kids? Sure, but it’s not the worst idea. The worst idea is what we’re doing now.
Tom Stoppard and the Failure of ‘Diasporism’

Reflections on *Leopoldstadt*

By Howard Husock

Among the most powerful scenes in Tom Stoppard’s *Leopoldstadt*—the playwright’s portrait of two interwoven Jewish families in Vienna before, during, and after the Shoah—is a conversation that takes place in the year 1899 between a businessman named Hermann and his mathematician brother-in-law about Theodor Herzl’s *The Jewish State*. The mathematician is taken with Herzl’s vision and has seen how it has set afire the shtetl Jews farther to the East in the Austro-Hungarian empire. Hermann is dismissive of the idea that the advanced culture he and his family enjoy could be replicated in any way in the Middle East.

“Do you want to do mathematics in the desert or in the city where Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven overlapped,” Hermann says, “and Brahms used to come to our house?” What’s more, he continues, Vienna—and by extension Western Europe—has been immeasurably enriched by the presence of its Jews. Without us, he says, the Hapsburg Empire would have been bereft of “banking, science, the law, the arts, literature, journalism.”

This dialogue instantly invokes in the theatergoers who have been spellbound by Stoppard’s heart-breaking work, first in London before the outbreak of the pandemic and now on Broadway, a sense of horrid foreboding. Here is the voice of assimilated European

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Economist Thorstein Veblen defended Diasporism from the vantage point of a philo-Semite—in ways that overlap perfectly with the views Stoppard explores in *Leopoldstadt*.

Jewry—indeed, Hermann is so assimilated that he is actually a convert to Catholicism, though solely for reasons of status and position—convinced that acceptance had at last arrived. We know it had not.

Stoppard, the master dramatist of our era, reveals over the course of three generations, including his own, the fate of these families. Characters he has brought fully to life, we learn, met their deaths in “Auschwitz, Auschwitz, Auschwitz, Auschwitz,” as we hear in the play’s final invocation. The world in which they had been so much at home had been ripped from under them, as it was for so many of my own family in Ukraine, and as it was for my wife’s cousin who was trapped in Berlin in 1938, writing letters to relatives in America who were powerless to get her a visa out—a situation Stoppard duplicates for his families. (She died in Terezin, the Nazi “model” concentration camp they used to fool the world.)

As horrifyingly misplaced as the Stoppard family’s cultural confidence and perceived appreciation for Jewish contribution would prove to be, it was not only the highly cultured Jews of Germany and Austria-Hungary who believed it. The case for not only the safety but the superiority of Diaspora for the Jewish people was never better made than by the brilliant American economist Thorstein Veblen, widely viewed today as the pioneer of behavioral economics. In his 1919 essay “The Intellectual Pre-Eminence of Jews in Modern Europe” in *Political Science Quarterly*, Veblen defended Diasporism from the vantage point of a philo-Semite—in ways that overlap perfectly with the views Stoppard explores through the character of Hermann and others in *Leopoldstadt*.

Veblen was arguably the first great American economic thinker. A Wisconsin-born son of Norwegian immigrants, he put names to human behaviors in ways that still resonate. His insight about “conspicuous consumption”—the tendency of the affluent to purchase and display consumer goods that reflect and reinforce their status—remains relevant, even as fur is replaced by Patagonia jackets and steak is replaced by vegan meat substitutes. He coined the term “conspicuous leisure,” as well—which anyone who has been bored by someone’s travel photos will instantly understand.

His ideas about Diaspora Jews are marked by a genuine and thought-provoking originality, based on obvious admiration for Jewish achievement (they “have contributed much more than an even share to the intellectual life of modern Europe”). The emancipated European Jew, he asserts, freed from the confines of the ghetto and the Pale, brings, by force of circumstances, a skepticism to his worldview. Once released from the bonds of tradition, the Jew within the Gentile world, per Veblen, experiences a loss of that peace of mind that is the birthright of the safe and sane quietist. He becomes a disturber of the intellectual peace, but only at the cost of becoming an intellectual wayfaring man, a wanderer in the intellectual no-man’s-land, seeking another place to rest, farther along the road, somewhere over the horizon. They are neither a complaisant nor a contented lot, these aliens of the uneasy feet.

It appears to be only when the gifted Jew escapes from the cultural environment created and fed by the particular genius of his own people, only when he falls into the alien lines of gentle inquiry and becomes a naturalized, though hyphenate, citizen in the gentile republic of learning, that he comes into his own as a creative leader in the world’s intellectual enterprise.

Veblen wrote these words before the astounding flowering of immigrant Jews in America—an experience that, before World War II, had convinced no small number of Jewish leaders that it was the U.S. that was our Zion, just as Hermann in Stoppard’s play calls Vienna “our promised land.”

*Leopoldstadt* demonstrates, in more than one way, how Veblen’s new European Jew—liberated from his shackles to bring a new perspective to the Gentile world—would be driven from existence. Most of the Jews we see on stage are murdered at the hands of the Nazis. Stoppard’s own parents barely escaped in 1938 by using business connections to flee from their native Czechoslovakia to Singapore. Over time, after a lengthy life journey that took his widowed mother to India and into marriage with a British officer who adopted her boy, Stoppard himself became thoroughly Anglicized. The character in the play that most closely

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The family at home in 1899. Scene from the Broadway production of Leopoldstadt.

which can be seen in its most extreme form as a kind of cultural murder—undermine the allure of Veblen's Diasporism. The essential problem is this: Jews in the Diaspora can never be truly safe, not only because the cloud of anti-Semitism still hovers over us but also because the magnetic lure of secularism and assimilation also threatens Jewry's existence. The families in Leopoldstadt believe they can strike a balance that will allow them to retain their identity while contributing to a larger non-Jewish culture. That belief kills them. The question the audience at Leopoldstadt asks itself at the play's end is what beliefs today's Jews might hold that pose the same threat.

It is a testimony to Stoppard's brilliance that there is undeniably something attractive about Hermann's evocation of the possibilities of Diaspora Judaism. The romantic in me once preferred to believe it too, based on the incredible flowering of immigrant Jews and their children here in America. American anthems were the handiwork of immigrant Irving Berlin: "God Bless America," "White Christmas," "Easter Parade." Berlin and others helped create a transcendent common culture in which Jews would be accepted because anyone could be a member. Then there's Broadway—in which Bernstein and Sondheim turned Shakespeare into a drama of immigrant Puerto Ricans and Italians who, we infer, should put aside their differences. Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein provided the vehicle in Showboat for Paul Robeson to sing about the Mississippi. New Yorkers Richard Rodgers and Hammerstein celebrated Oklahoma.

It was like a Diaspora social contract: Jews help to create a common, tolerant atmosphere in exchange for acceptance—and at the risk, if things fell apart, of being among the first to suffer. A modern theory of Chosen-ness.

It's not working out that way in 2022 America, however. Our common culture is under attack by the forces of identity politics. The fact that Jewish organizations must call for public denunciations of anti-Semitism is not reassuring. There have been physical attacks on individual Jews on the streets and murders at synagogues. The Jew-hating rantings of Kanye West were followed by basketball player Kyrie Irving's recommendations of anti-Semitic documentaries.

The Jew as skeptic/contributor assumes not only a reasonably tolerant culture but, crucially, an ongoing identification on the part of Jews with actual practiced Judaism and its virtues: the combination of ethics, learning, and skepticism embodied in the Torah and Talmud. It is here where the Veblen vision runs aground. The Pew Research Center's 2020 survey of American Jews revealed that 27 percent of those of Jewish background today consider themselves to be "atheistic, agnostic, or nothing at all." Among Jews under 30, 40 percent describe themselves this way. Six in 10 recent marriages involving Jews were with non-Jews. Non-Orthodox Jews are melting away into the broader society. Veblen's vision of a special place for the Jew as both insider and outsider not only failed in Europe because it was overtaken by the desire to destroy; it has been overtaken in America by this country's unprecedented welcome.
It is a testimony to Tom Stoppard’s brilliance that there is undeniably something attractive about Hermann’s evocation of the possibilities of Diaspora Judaism.

What’s more, Veblen’s skepticism about the value of Jewish in-gathering has been overtaken by actual events. He feared that the Zionist project would take on the character of insular Orthodoxy:

If the adventure is carried to that consummate outcome which seems to be aimed at, it should apparently be due to be crowned with a large national complacency and, possibly, a profound and self-sufficient content on the part of the Chosen People domiciled once more in the Chosen Land; and when and in so far as the Jewish people in this way turn inward on themselves, their prospective contribution to the world’s intellectual output should, in the light of the historical evidence, fairly be expected to take on the complexion of Talmudic lore, rather than that character of free-swung skeptical initiative which their renegades have habitually infused into the pursuit of the modern sciences abroad among the nations.

Wrong. It was Israeli innovation that brought drip irrigation to not only its own deserts but the world. If self-driving cars become reality, it will be the result of Israeli-born technology acquired by Intel. Nor have the arts in Israel been reduced to Talmudic interpretation, as the brilliant fiction of David Grossman (among many others) exemplifies. Israeli television has proven not only creative in itself but a source of creative energy throughout the world. And history has assured that what might be euphemistically described as the creative tension between Jews and non-Jews, born of ongoing military threat and Western anti-Zionism, has not abated in the Promised Land. Just the opposite.
As much as the contributions of Diaspora Jews should inspire pride and celebration, it has become clear that there has emerged no serious alternative other than Israel for those who would sustainably perpetuate specifically Jewish achievement and inquiry. Those of us in the Diaspora will not all move there—although Stoppard is here to remind us that Jews will always require a refuge from the forces of hatred that now seek Israel's destruction. But we are called upon to support the Zionist project not only as a form of self-defense but also to continue providing the wider world with the fruits of Jewish labors. Leopoldstadt's invocation of a potential Jewish state at the play's beginning, and Israel's existence at its end, mark it as one of the most profoundly Zionist documents of our time.

It is a reflection of the durability and power of anti-Semitism that, even if the playwright had uncovered the facts of his own Jewish past in 1955 the way his young British character does, rather than in the 1980s, he would have risked a great deal by writing Leopoldstadt as a young man in the wake of his career-making success with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead in 1966. He likely would have become known as a Jewish, rather than a British, playwright—a dramatist making a special pleading due to the tragedy visited upon his own family. No, it was his established reputation as the greatest living English dramatist that has enabled this unlikely production—among other things, Leopoldstadt has a cast of 38, the largest any play on Broadway has seen in generations. Therein lies yet another lesson about the limits of Diasporism.
The Taylor Sheridan Juggernaut

The weird politics of television’s most successful producer

By Rick Marin

The TOP FIVE programs of the 2021–22 TV season went like this: football, football, football, football, Yellowstone—the modern-day Western with Kevin Costner that averaged about 2.4 million viewers in this, its fifth, season. What’s impressive about that is the massive numbers Yellowstone gets despite airing on hard-to-find cable and streaming platforms: the Paramount Network and Peacock. Yet it has made itself such must-see-TV that it cut through the noise—including Hollywood skepticism about anyone in a cowboy hat—to become the most popular not-football show on TV. It has also launched an empire for its creator, Taylor Sheridan.

His interwoven shows are turning a traditionally blue-state medium deep red.

This year, Sheridan followed up Yellowstone with a prequel called 1883, a full-on period Western starring country music’s First Couple, Tim McGraw and Faith Hill (who can act almost, if not quite, as well as they sing). Its first season follows the forebearers of Costner’s character, John Dutton, on a wagon train from Texas. They eventually settle on the Montana land that will, seven generations later, become a battleground pitting Dutton’s traditional rancher values against everything the modern world can throw at him: progress, environmentalism, murderous militias, and, most heinous of all, corporate carpetbaggers from New York and Los Angeles (the twin poles of Sheridan’s axis of evil). The Dutton family saga just got another series with 1923, starring Harrison Ford and Helen Mirren.

After seeing what Sheridan did for Costner—i.e., write

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him the role of a lifetime—A-listers are now lining up at the barn door. Tom Hanks and Billy Bob Thornton did cameos in Yellowstone. Jeremy Renner is The Mayor of Kingstown, Sheridan's gritty crime drama about America's prison system. And Sylvester Stallone emerged from his cryo chamber to star in Tulsa King, about a New York mobster exiled to Oklahoma.

Besides the gun porn and vilification of coastal elites, the politics of Yellowstone are way right of anything on narrative TV. But it's a unique brand of right.

A prodigious and insanely prolific writer who wrote and directed every episode of the first season of Yellowstone and 1883 and still seems to write most of everything else in the Sheridanverse (as it's been dubbed), Sheridan is also in his shows. He gave himself a small part in 1883 and has a recurring role in Yellowstone that allows him to show off his own Texas twang and legit cowboy skills. He's a brand now, big enough to buy the legendary 266,000-acre West Texas ranch that inspired the next Yellowstone spin-off, 6666. This once-struggling character actor started writing only at age 40 and saw his screenplays for two highly regarded movies produced in quick succession in just two years—the cartel thriller Sicario in 2015 and the superb Oscar-nominated cops-and-band-robbers tale Hell or High Water in 2016. Now he's become un challengably the most successful television producer of the 2020s.

I CAME LATE to Yellowstone, being myself one of those effete city slickers allergic to horses and country music. I actually have been to Montana; I went 20 years ago on a libertarian think-tank junket. I fly-fished in the Gallatin River, luxuriated in a hot tub under the stars with government-phobic Mormons. But as my nature-loving wife will attest, I'm better suited to The Great Indoors. To make a short story shorter: I'm not the audience for a show that indulges in long montages of cowboys roping calves. And yet, once I started, I binged Yellowstone's first four seasons with a “just-one-more-episode” fervor I hadn't felt since Breaking Bad—or, to date myself, since I used my journalistic connections to get advance VHS screeners of the first season of The Sopranos. Like those instant TV classics, Yellowstone gives you every reason to keep watching. Breathtaking scenery. Sex. Violence. Soapy turns that would make Desperate Housewives blush, wrapped (like its coastal-elite coefficient, Succession) in an homage to King Lear. But the No. 1 reason to watch, and keep watching, is Kevin Costner.

Like Cary Grant, Costner (at 67) seems to have grown better-looking with age, the lines in his face like fissures in the snowcapped mountains he's always staring out at. Sheridan has given him something he never had: gravitas. And a fascinatingly murky complexity. As with Tony Soprano and Walter White, it's not clear whether John Dutton is a good man who does bad things or a bad one who does good things. In the first season, we learn he literally brands his employees, sizzling the ranch's “Y” over their hearts as if they're his cattle, or slaves.

He also sends anyone who poses a threat to the Dutton Ranch to “the train station”—a euphemism for a one-way ticket to the bottom of a canyon across the Idaho state line. But Dutton also seems like the last plain-spoken man in a world of double-talk (“When I make a promise, that means something”). And he's fearless in the face of danger, taking on armed gunmen in the middle of a holdup, then shooting them dead. The gunmen had killed the sheriff, but everyone knows who the real sheriff is 'round these parts—it's Costner, who wears a cowboy hat whether he's on his horse or in a suit. And those suits are invariably black, as if he's in mourning over having to wear one at all.

John Dutton spends a lot of time sitting in front of a crackling fire in an enormous ranch house that would make Ralph Lauren dampen his chaps, nursing a whiskey and brooding over which of his three heirs he could possibly entrust with the reins to his reign. His eldest son, Lee, gets killed off early on, so it's down to his daughter and two sons. Beth is a foul-mouthed, alcoholic hedge-fund hit woman who uses her numbers savvy and her often literal ball-busting skills to help her father bankrupt his enemies. Jamie is the lawyer in the family, Harvard-educated but lacking (for reasons that unfold) the Dutton DNA, which under a microscope would probably reveal itself to be shaped more like a lariat than a double helix. The youngest, Kayce, is a wild mustang of a man, an ex-Navy Seal fearless in the face of danger, taking on armed gunmen in the middle of a holdup, then shooting them dead. I make a promise, that means something”). And he's in mourning over having to wear one at all.

Like Cary Grant, Costner (at 67) seems to have grown better-looking with age, the lines in his face like fissures in the snowcapped mountains he's always staring out at. Sheridan has given him something he never had: gravitas. And a fascinatingly murky complexity. As with Tony Soprano and Walter White, it's not clear whether John Dutton is a good man who does bad things or a bad one who does good things. In the first season, we learn he literally brands his employees, sizzling the ranch's “Y” over their hearts as if they're his cattle, or slaves.

Who Dutton would really like to leave the ranch to is Rip Wheeler, a burly badass in charge of the ranch hands and the obedient son Dutton never had. “Yes,
“sir” is his default reply to any order. Rip was an orphan when Dutton took him in. He’d just killed his father, as retribution for his dad’s having killed his mother and little brother. Dutton instantly saw a prospect he could one day ask to do work too dirty for his natural-born sons. Indeed, Rip has taken more than a few unlucky souls to “the train station.” He rules the bunkhouse, the ranch hands’ dorm, with an iron cattle brand. Cole Hauser’s Rip is, after Costner, the runaway performance of the series, turning on a dime from tough as hardtack to charming and vulnerable. (Fun Fact: Hauser is Jewish, and a descendant of the Warner Brothers.)

Hauser is a standout, but all the casting is dead-on, from the leads to the supporting cowpokes in the bunkhouse. The English actress Kelly Reilly bursts out of her skintight dresses as Beth, an untamed shrew who specializes in first-impression character assas-

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sinations, especially of would-be lotharios who make the mistake of trying to hit on her. A high-functioning psychotic, Beth gets up from breakfast chirping, “Off to ruin a life!” and says things to her hated brother Jamie like, “You should really consider killing yourself.” The only man she has a soft spot for, besides her beloved daddy, is Rip. They’ve been friends with benefits since they were teens, and her lips are the only ones that get past the toothpick perennially lodged in his.

Wes Bentley’s unloved and unlovable Jamie is the ultimate worm, desperate for approval from a father who shows more emotion putting down a horse than to his children. “I can’t wait to see which disappointment this is,” Dutton grumbles as a car pulls up at the ranch bearing one of his messed-up progeny. Luke Grimes as Kayce toggles between moodiness and rage, the latter expressed with his fists or whatever automatic weapon he happens to have in his pickup. As the “hot” brother, it’s on him to carry the sex scenes, though the only time my interest really flags is during the tortured-romance stuff with his wife.

The love stories in Yellowstone are well and good, but the real “I’m not crying, you’re crying” moments are between the cowboys. The most moving is Forrie J. Smith, a native Montanan and ex stunt man, as Lloyd, the eminence grise of the bunkhouse who wears his heart on his grey handlebar moustache.

The bunkhouse, by the way, is a brilliant device by Sheridan—pure wish fulfillment for the male viewers. It’s a place you get to hang out with your buddies every night, play poker, insult each other, and knock back “Yellow Jackets,” aka Coors Banquet beers. It’s Central Perk—the coffee shop that fulfilled the same function on Friends—without the neurosis. And more knife fights.

The narrative formula of Yellowstone is familiar enough: Each season, a new “big bad” poses an existential threat to the Dutton Ranch. First, it’s casino-rich Native Americans (led by the excellent Gil Birmingham) plotting to reclaim tribal land, in league with a slick real-estate developer (Danny Huston, also excellent). Then it’s a local casino boss (played by go-to apex predator Neal McDonough), followed by a Wall
Street behemoth. Oh, and throw in some armed-to-the-teeth Montana militia to up the body count. Which is considerable. It’s hard to think of a principal character on *Yellowstone* who hasn’t killed someone, or almost been killed. (Beth was literally blown up in her office—and survived.) Everyone wants Dutton’s vast swath of prime real estate, but they’re going to have to pry it from his cold, dead hands.

**BEsides the Gun** porn and vilification of coastal elites, the politics of *Yellowstone* are way right of anything on narrative TV. But it’s a unique brand of right. A judge who sentences an environmental activist to 10 years in prison tells Dutton, “The cancer of entitlement is eating away at everything. I just snip away at the symptom.” But then, once he’s elected governor, Dutton ends up sleeping with the activist and paroles her to advise him on radical environmental matters. He must really like her because, as governor, one of his first acts is to fire an entire roomful of advisers, saving the state $1.5 million.

In Season One, Dutton goes to war with the local tribe over cattle rustling—it’s what gets his eldest son killed—but Sheridan is deeply sympathetic to the Native American cause. Kayce’s wife lectures at the university about “genocide” and becomes more and more radicalized as the show goes on. So is Yellowstone stolen land, or does it rightfully belong to Dutton? When a busload of Asian tourists wanders from Yellowstone Park onto his ranch to take pictures of a bear, Dutton jumps out of his pickup with a shotgun. An old man scolds him in his native tongue. Dutton squints: “What’s he sayin’?” The tour guide translates: “He says it’s wrong for one man to own all this. He says you should share with all the people.” Dutton unloads both barrels into the sky, sending the tourists scurrying back their bus. “This is America,” he instructs the old man. “We don’t share land here.”

As governor, Dutton makes it clear that this land is our land—it is definitely not your land. By which he means rich outsiders making Montana their vacation playground. In his inaugural speech, he vows to double the property tax, impose a 6 percent sales tax, and add vehicle-registration fees on nonresidents. He cancels a development project that would have brought thousands of jobs to the state, in large part because it would have meant building an airport on his property. He turns down all offers to sell his land, including level-headed entreaties by his children, because the way he sees it, “if someone had all the money in the world, this is what they’d buy.”

If you had to boil it down, Sheridan’s worldview seems to be: “Government and capitalism bad, cowboys and horses good.” He’s at that weird spot on the political spectrum where the far left and the reactionary right meet. And no one knows quite what to make of it, except that every Nielson household with a pickup in the driveway is watching—and a bunch of us with hybrids, too.

HBO’s *Succession*—with its impeccable liberal pedigree and its portrayal of the pseudo-Murdochs as a nest of vipers—has won 10 Emmys. *Yellowstone* has won exactly none. This anti-heartland bias may come as no surprise to Sheridan. The show was originally at HBO, Sheridan has said, but the premium cable channel ended up “not going forward” (in industry parlance), because an executive thought it should be about a “park.” To which he replied, “Buddy, you’re the exact reason I’m making this.”

Other networks may have the Emmys. Sheridan has the viewers. «
From Son and Brother to Leader

Bibi: My Story
By Benjamin Netanyahu
Threshold Editions, 736 pages

Reviewed by Seth Mandel

IF YOU ATTENDED Jewish day school or spent the summers of your youth at a Jewish sleepaway camp, you couldn't go a full year without watching Operation Thunderbolt, a movie that dramatized the mission undertaken by Israeli commandoes to rescue more than 100 passengers on a civilian flight hijacked by terrorists and taken to Entebbe, Uganda, in 1976.

Those repeated viewings turned out to be unexpectedly useful, since the raid on Entebbe changed the course of Israeli history. The one rescuer to lose his life in the mission was Yonatan Netanyahu, a magnetic and highly decorated soldier whose death sparked the political career of his younger brother, Benjamin “Bibi” Netanyahu. In 2019, Bibi passed David Ben-Gurion to become the longest-serving prime minister in Israeli history. Along the way, he remade Israeli politics even as he worked to unshackle its economy from the last vestiges of its socialist and monopolist roots while expanding the Jewish state’s global footprint from China to Russia to Eastern Europe to the Arab world.

His brother Yoni’s death was always understood to be the origin story of Netanyahu’s endeavors as a public figure. But never has that fact been made clearer than in Bibi: My Story, the new autobiography by the once-again-incoming Israeli prime minister. The book begins with the tragedy of his brother’s death and depicts “how Yoni’s sacrifice and example helped me overcome inconsolable grief, thrust me into a public battle against terrorism, and led me to become Israel’s longest-serving prime minister.”

Bibi: My Story is a surprisingly sentimental and ideologically thoughtful autobiography from a politician known for his cold, hard realism. Unlike other political autobiographies, which mostly serve to obscure their subjects, this one provides us with the tools to understand this signature figure in modern Jewish history.

The one person who influenced Netanyahu’s life more than his brother was his father, the scholar and historian Benzion Netanyahu. Benzion’s teaching appointments in the United States were responsible for...
Bibi’s childhood and teenage years spent in America. Those years not only provided Bibi with the fluency in English that his own mother (who grew up in part in Minneapolis) had; they also gave him a grasp of the country he would need to navigate as no Israeli had done before him. Bibi studied at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, staggering his time between elite military service in Israel and elite higher education in the United States. Rather than leave the exploration of his father’s influence at that, Netanyahu puts it under the microscope. It is one of the pleasures of the book.

In addition to his studies—his exploration of the Spanish Inquisition marked him as one of the great scholars of the age—Benzion Netanyahu was a Zionist activist and admirer of the great Jewish intellectual Vladimir Jabotinsky. The leader of the Revisionist Zionists and the most sophisticated exponent in his time of the concept of Jewish peoplehood, Jabotinsky was the force behind the Jewish Legion in World War I, which fought as Royal Fusiliers under the command of Colonel John Patterson. Patterson eventually became such a close friend of the Netanyahus that he was named Yoni Netanyahu’s godfather.

As the Second World War approached, Jabotinsky sought to create another Jewish fighting force. In the spring of 1940, Jabotinsky arrived in New York with a delegation that included Benzion Netanyahu, who had been raising money for the trip back in Palestine. Jabotinsky died that August in New York. Benzion Netanyahu picked up the torch and became director of the New Zionist Organization of America, making inroads into both the Republican and Democratic Parties.

Bibi Netanyahu mentions this for two reasons. First, he uses it to explain his own ideological roots and the experiences and influences that shaped his belief that Israel could achieve peace only through strength. Second, he offers it as a response to his critics who accuse him of politicizing the U.S.–Israel relationship by deepening his ties with Republicans whenever Democratic enthusiasm for Israel starts to waver. “Father,” Netanyahu writes, “did something virtually unprecedented in Zionist and Jewish circles at the time. He went to the Republicans. He did so not because of an innate identification with this or that party but because he believed that influencing Republican policy was the best way to influence Democratic policy” (emphasis in the original). The result was that the Republican Party’s 1944 platform included support for the establishment of a Jewish state; “cornered,” the Democratic Party soon added the Zionist plank to its own platform.

This strategy of appealing to global public opinion is almost an ideology in itself. And that is a central insight of *Bibi: My Story*. Netanyahu traces it back to a 1929 essay in which Jabotinsky developed “the Theory of Public Pressure.”
The fight to sway public opinion, the surest way to effect change in a democracy, requires a public campaign "like the constant drizzle on a green English lawn," in Jabotinsky's words. To Bibi, his father "was the quintessential practitioner of Jabotinsky's formula: Influence governments through public opinion, influence public opinion by appealing to justice, influence leaders by appealing to interests."

That is what holds the reader's interest in the second half of the book, which mostly avoids interpersonal drama and is light on revelations. The Bibi/Benzion interpretation of Jabotinsky's theory of public pressure is the Rosetta stone to deciphering his decision-making throughout a uniquely successful four-decade career in politics.

"It wasn't foolproof. Take Netanyahu's most controversial foray into shaping U.S. public opinion: his decision to accept an invitation by House Republicans to address a Joint Session of Congress in 2015 to denounce President Obama's looming nuclear deal with Iran. Netanyahu writes that he agonized over whether to go through with the speech but finally came to believe it was his responsibility: "If I don't take a stand on a nuclear deal that could threaten Israel's survival, I thought, what the hell am I doing here? That clinched it."

Contrary to his more dismissive critics, Netanyahu was right about Iran's nuclear program representing an existential threat. And the terms of Obama's deal were, indeed, disastrous—the inspection regime was full of holes, and the restrictions were only temporary anyway. But could Netanyahu's speech have stopped it? No. The cost in diplomatic capital arguably outweighed the benefit.

Bibi's victories have been more numerous than his failures, however, and they began right out of the gate. After Yoni's death, Netanyahu threw himself into the study of terrorism. Entebbe was a clear indicator of the way such sub-state violence, often with the assent or material support of states, would shape global security in the final quarter of the 20th century and beyond.

Netanyahu's quick mastery of the subject and its implications soon made him a familiar figure among policymakers and politicians in the West. George Shultz, the future secretary of state, was one of them. When Bibi was recruited to join Israel's diplomatic corps in the U.S. during the Reagan administration, his relationship with Shultz paid dividends in the fight against international terrorism. Shultz put Netanyahu's ideas in front of President Reagan. The result was that the first true war on terror was prosecuted by the United States using Netanyahu's framing, especially the need to hold state sponsors accountable for their support of non-state actors. That principle would guide the West after 9/11 as well.

The book goes through the major..."
points in Bibi’s astonishing political career after that, mostly offering the Cliff’s Notes version of events spiced up with the occasional personal assessment of the American presidents and some of their top aides along the way. And here is where you can tell he expected to be back in office dealing with some of these figures again. Joe Biden appears and reappears in times of trouble the way Mother Mary comes to Paul McCartney in “Let It Be.” After Obama made clear he intended to put daylight between Washington and Jerusalem, Biden, then Obama’s vice president, told Netanyahu: “You don’t have too many friends here, buddy. I’m the one friend you do have. So call me when you need to.”

When a housing official announced plans for new units in the Ramat Shlomo neighborhood of Jerusalem during Biden’s visit to Israel, the Obama administration blew its top, disingenuously manufacturing a crisis. But the man who was supposedly disrespected directly by the announcement—Biden—was the one who kept his head.

Netanyahu writes: “Over the phone, Biden and I put together a task force to stamp out the fire, consisting of Ron Dermer, US Middle East representative Dan Shapiro and Israel’s ambassador to the US, Michael Oren. After hours of work they agreed on a statement I would issue later that night…. While this statement was being worked out, Biden came with his wife Jill for a late dinner. We discussed his life, the tragedy he had to overcome with the loss of his first wife and daughter, the challenges he had faced raising his two sons, the support he received from Jill. It was a wonderful evening and a good ending to our meetings.”

When Ariel Sharon died in 2014, Biden attended the funeral. Afterward, Bibi’s wife, Sara Netanyahu, invited Biden for dinner at the Netanyahu residence. “We had another friendly dinner,” Netanyahu writes, a bit obsequiously. “Biden, always the gentleman, sent Sara a bouquet of flowers and a thoughtful note the next day.”

For his part, Donald Trump receives expected praise for his willingness to cross the foreign-policy establishment and keep his promises—chiefly to leave the Iran deal and move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem. Trump also recognized Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights and bucked the “Palestine-first” approach of a generation of American negotiators who had insisted that wider Israel–Arab peace would have to wait for the attainment of a two-state solution. The Abraham Accords that resulted represent a sea change in Arab normalization with Israel.

This earns Trump the benefit of the doubt from Netanyahu when he gets something wrong. Trump’s early enthusiasm for Israeli–Palestinian negotiations is blamed on bad advice from Jared Kushner. And Trump’s perception that Netanyahu was the obstacle to peace is attributed to “a Jewish mutual friend of Trump and mine with whom I had severed my personal ties [who] had bad-mouthed me in front of the president”—a thinly veiled allusion to World Jewish Congress President Ronald Lauder.

Just as carefully calibrated are the (admittedly rare) targets of Netanyahu’s ire, most prominently Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid, who each took a turn as prime minister after briefly forming a coalition without Bibi. These men, Netanyahu knows, remain in his life and in his way. “This ‘Brotherly Alliance’ between Bennett’s supposedly hard-right party and Lapid’s party on the center left was peculiar,” he writes. “Their platforms shared few goals, if any. The only thing that united them was a desire for power, and a willingness to shed their commitments to their voters to achieve it.”

All of which is a reminder that Bibi remains in the arena. While he continues to win elections, the number of potential coalition allies is dwindling, and his adversaries smell blood.

And yet, if his confidence is flagging, Bibi doesn’t show it. This book was written in the year between Netanyahu’s ouster from the prime minister’s office and the November election victory that has all but secured his return to power. Netanyahu acknowledges writing parts of the book “in the Knesset plenary during impossibly long budget debates.” He knew he had a limited window until he was back in the big chair. He never intended the end of Bibi: My Story to be the end of his story. Its existence is just another part of that story, and it’s a far better book than we had any reason to think it would be.

Commentary
A Superpower Origin Story

The Ghost at the Feast: America and the Collapse of World Order, 1900–1941
By Robert Kagan
Knopf, 688 pages

Reviewed by Brian Stewart

A MERICANS imperial inheritance and unique national ideology are core themes of Robert Kagan’s massive scholarly project. He has worked for the past two decades on a revisionist history in the best sense of the term—an exploration of the paradoxical character of the American people and their approach to power. A historian at the Brookings Institution with a facility for clear and cogent prose, Kagan is determined to prove that, far from exemplifying an isolationist approach to world affairs long claimed by many scholars, Americans have gathered and deployed massive strength to shape the international system to their liking. And yet, in spite of this spirited pursuit of power, Americans have seldom been happy in its possession or comfortable in its use.

Kagan’s first volume, Dangerous Nation (2006), focused on the ruthless march of American power across the North American continent and the consolidation of the union. The second volume, The Ghost at the Feast, is just now being published. Kagan carries the narrative forward to the critical period bracketed by the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and his distant cousin Franklin Roosevelt. This era saw a surge of national altruism and purpose but also revealed a yawning gap between America’s assumptions about the efficacy of its spiritual force and the actual ways of the world. The U.S.’s reluctance to be a full participant in world affairs diminished its influence until dangerous changes in the global distribution of power summoned its urgent and unstinting involvement.

The book opens on the cusp of the Spanish–American War, a military clash often regarded—erroneously, in Kagan’s view—as a turning point in the history of U.S. foreign policy. The conflict had been preceded by an economic boom and an immense military buildup in a time of peace. America’s Army numbered only in the tens of thousands—a “corporal’s guard,” as Theodore Roosevelt lamented—but her naval might was burgeoning. The “New Navy” became one of the three largest on earth, with a battleship fleet capable of sailing the high seas.

The country’s willingness to use its newfound muscle lagged, but the advent of a humanitarian catastrophe so close to American shores presented an unmistakable opportunity. For most Americans, the “splendid little war” (to use John Hay’s appraisal) didn’t bring the loss of national innocence that its detractors, then and since, have claimed. Rather, the intervention to liberate Cuba and annex the Philippines was the continuation of a national tradition that sought to leverage national strength to promote American interests and ideals. Residing firmly in this camp, Theodore Roosevelt would later aver that “our chief usefulness to humanity rests on our combining power with high purpose.”

Although putting the republic’s swelling power in the service of preserving peace and advancing civilization was hardly greeted with universal assent, it had deep roots in American thinking. A similar impulse had spawned the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, asserting American primacy in the Western hemisphere to keep European rivals at bay and to prevent divine-right absolutism from gaining a foothold in the new world. In the confrontation between Washington and Madrid, it wasn’t hard to see the culmination of this bellicose doctrine.

American internationalists of that era believed that their nation’s growing power brought with it growing responsibility. This spurred the decision to lay waste to the moribund Spanish Empire. But even this vision of world power was circumscribed. The United States remained suspicious of strategic commitments abroad and suffered its share of troubles at home, including social upheaval, political dysfunction, and financial instability.

Although occasionally deploying the Marines to regional flashpoints, the United States relied heavily on soft power. As Woodrow Wilson put it with more than a touch of condescension, America’s duty was to teach “the South American republics to elect good men.” Nonetheless, the centrality of power to an effective foreign policy carried the country, belatedly but emphatically, into its first European war.

Kagan’s treatment of the various motives underpinning America’s
entry in the First World War is exemplary. There were American strategic thinkers who believed that the United States had no vital interests beyond the Western hemisphere. But by the summer of 1914, they were on the defensive as others argued that American interests—and the American belief in justice—would be irreparably harmed if the United States kept to itself while paranoid autocratic powers pursued a course of aggrandizement.

In many ways, Woodrow Wilson personified that ideological divide. At first, the progressive president offered mediation and called for “peace without victory.” But in time he came to believe that the belligerents needed to be humbled. Wary of power politics but alarmed by the depredations of Wilhelmine Germany, the United States entered the Great War as an “associated power.” In Wilson’s mind, the strife erupted because “Britain has the earth, and Germany wants it.” The Western allies, whose hard-nosed realpolitik attributed the causes of war to Berlin’s bid for hegemony, pressed for Prussian autocracy, which demanded the reform of systems instigated by Prussian autocracy, which demanded the reform of regimes to “make the world safe for democracy,” as he put it in April 1917.

Conventional wisdom holds that after November 11, 1918, peace was forced on Germany in the onerous terms described by British economist John Maynard Keynes in his famous jeremiad, The Economic Consequences of the Peace. But Kagan convinces the open-minded reader that the terms of surrender were nothing of the sort. For all the talk of the Versailles “diktat,” Germany faced neither territorial dismemberment nor financial ruin. The peace settlement was not inspired by Allied avarice, let alone by designs to smother the German economy. In reality, the debacle of the interwar years was a beggar-thy-neighbor policy of tariffs combined with military weakness that failed to secure an order of free trade and liberal progress.

Another piece of conventional wisdom fixes the source of European rivalries and furies; it needed an “onshore balancer” to suppress them. This is the role European powers had called for America to play in order to stabilize their war-ravaged economies and keep them from one another’s throats. Wilson welcomed such a grand vocation—though he conceived it in terms of moral suasion more than actual power—and dreaded what might result if the U.S. deferred. The world, he warned his countrymen, would be “absolutely in despair if America deserts it.” As Harold Nicolson, a British diplomat at the Paris conference recalled, it was fear of this impending American abdication that (in words that give Kagan his title) was “the ghost at all our feasts.”

Disillusioned by utopians’ extravagantly high expectations (“a war to end all wars”) and halted by the defects of the Versailles Treaty, Americans were keen to jettison their new responsibilities in the Old World. Spotting a chance to defeat Wilson, Republicans worked to turn public opinion against the League of Nations—Wilson’s ardent but hazy scheme of collective security to keep America in the European mix. Much to Wilson’s grief, the U.S. Senate refused to ratify the treaty.

Wilson’s dream of U.S. leadership remained just that. The golden

Commentary

As Kagan elaborates in The Ghost at the Feast, a lasting peace required much more than a risk-averse ‘offshore balancer’ to contain Europe’s rivalries and furies; it needed an ‘onshore balancer’ to suppress them.
opportunity to repair a fractured world was frittered away. Republicans settled for a foreign policy that expressed itself not in the muscular internationalism of Theodore Roosevelt but in the insular nationalism of Senator William Borah. President Warren Harding set the tone for this era of abstention when he insisted on a “return to normalcy.”

This interwar parochialism has been justly criticized, but Kagan abjures “isolationism” as a term to describe it. Though limiting its global commitments, Washington pursued foreign markets in which to trade and invest, its Navy remained a potent force in two oceans, and it tried (if half-heartedly) to control international armaments while “outlawing” war. This conception of national interests was already familiar to states in the international order: defending the homeland, avoiding foreign commitments, preserving the country’s freedom of action, and creating prosperity at home.

The Ghost at the Feast draws its force from the inadequacy of that vision for the world’s leading democracy. “Normalcy” set in motion the disastrous chain of events that plunged the world into deprivation, cruelty, waste, and conflagration. First came the Great Depression and the rise of fascism, and then a second and even more catastrophic world war.

The beginning of America’s strategic reassessment came before the outbreak of war but was too little and too late. Franklin Roosevelt intuited that the oceans were the country’s last line of defense, not its first, and that America was strategically dependent on the preservation of British sea power. He also believed that the Nazis’ illiberal ideology and formidable position at the heart of Europe fundamentally threatened the American way of life. But in public he pledged to keep America out of “foreign wars” at whatever cost, at least until those wars were no longer foreign.

But Roosevelt began to urge Americans, however haltingly, to look beyond their immediate physical security and defend a wider liberal order. He declared that if Hitler, Mussolini, and Imperial Japan were allowed to overturn regional stabilities, America would become a “lone island” in a world dominated by the “philosophy of force.” Such a world would be a “shabby and dangerous place to live in—yes, even for Americans to live in.”

FDR’s foresight was vindicated by history. The wages of deserting the world had been a rapidly deteriorating global order and a collapsing civilization. In the end, America sent its armies and fleets to the Old World to defeat totalitarianism. In the course of that task, the imperative of denying any other power hegemonic control amounted to an affirmative strategy, maintained to the present day, of exerting American hegemony unto the ends of the earth.

The depiction of the flourishing of America’s global predominance will await the final volume of Dangerous Nation. But the latest installment is an occasion to contemplate the grim state of the world before the emergence of Pax Americana. It might also spur advocates of a “post-American” order to ponder the consequences of any American retreat from its erstwhile role. The Ghost at the Feast is thus essential for statesmen who acknowledge American ambition without hypocrisy, and for all who would like to think about power and responsibility in a statesmanlike manner. 

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Don’t Know Much About

The Death of Learning: How American Education Has Failed Our Students and What to Do about It
By John Agresto
Encounter Books, 256 pages

Reviewed by Jonathan Marks

Jonathan Marks, a contributor to Commentary’s blog, is the author of Let’s Be Reasonable: A Conservative Case for Liberal Education.

John Agresto grew up in a “fairly poor Brooklyn family that didn’t think much about education” and “in a house almost without books.” His father, a “day laborer in construction,” had nothing against higher learning. He just thought that a union dock-worker job was a safer bet for his son. Agresto did “almost no childhood reading.”

Yet he went on to earn a Ph.D. in government from Cornell University, to teach at prestigious colleges and universities, to serve as acting chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and to lead the New Mexico campus of St. John’s College. How did a boy who barely read anything become president of a college whose curriculum consists almost entirely of Western classics, from Aristotle’s Ethics to Tolstoy’s War and Peace?

As Agresto, who now runs an educational consulting company, ex-

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plains in The Death of Learning, a nun gave him a book. He was in the eighth grade, the nun was one of his teachers, and the book was Booth Tarkington’s Penrod and Sam. Tarkington isn’t “great literature,” he writes. But Penrod and Sam, a book “about things that never happened,” had an effect in Agresto’s neighborhood, in the form of a club modeled after the one created by the book’s main characters, complete with initiation rites, war cries, and a flag. A “work of someone else’s imagination, written down in a book” had “pierced... everyday street life.” Agresto was hooked on reading, which makes it possible “to possess someone’s mind.” Tarkington had, in a small way, expanded his idea of what was possible and sharpened his real-world insight. Agresto went on to read and teach the Greeks, Shakespeare, and other “extremely dead” geniuses. The Death of Learning defends liberal education as a form of demanding engagement with such writers. And at the core of the process is the experience Agresto had with Tarkington, of reading authors to “make their minds live in ours.”

But Agresto doesn’t dismiss those who wonder, “What’s the use?” He acknowledges that “liberal education has always seen itself in the camp of the cultural and intellectual, in the realm of thought more than action,” and he has little patience for defenders of liberal education who glory in its uselessness. Agresto’s vision of education is democratic and American in the best sense. It recognizes that the liberal arts are not the exclusive possession of elites who can afford not to think about their practical use. “Sometimes the children of the Brooklyn poor,” he writes, “find their way into the liberal arts more easily than the children of the Hampton leisured.”

America, a “nation of progress and production,” is more apt to respect the part of the intellect that helps us build rockets than the part that helps us appreciate Mozart. This isn’t much of a problem for Agresto, who believes the case for professional and vocational education needn’t rest solely on employment prospects. He sees a range of additional benefits to education in such programs. “How about persistence in understanding?” he writes. “How about attention to detail? How about seeing the interworking of cause and effect?” Moreover, American founders such as Thomas Jefferson were learned and practical. Jefferson, he writes, had “no trouble combining his liberal learning with the serious study of everything from agronomy to viniculture.”

What is a problem for Agresto is that liberal educators are failing to make a strong case for liberal education. This failure seems to have contributed to a decline in liberal education, as measured by the sinking demand for several liberal-arts degrees. History degrees made up 1.2 percent of bachelor’s degrees earned in 2019, the lowest share in the 70 years for which we have records and well below the 5.7 percent peak in the late 1960s. Similarly, English degrees made up about 1.9 percent of bachelor’s degrees in 2019, another nadir, and sharply down from 7.5 percent, in the early 1970s. Agresto notes that English is now outranked in popularity by “parks, recreation, leisure, and fitness studies.” And it’s not even close.

Much of this decline is beyond the control of universities. Interest in humanities degrees dipped considerably after the financial crisis of 2008 and never recovered. The trouble begins before a student sets foot in college. In 2015, according to the Higher Education Research Institute, well over half of incoming freshman reported spending an hour or less per week on reading for personal interest. For a liberal-arts professor, that makes for a tough crowd. Americans over the age of 15, according to the American Time Use Survey, spend less than 16 minutes per day on personal reading (and about three hours watching TV).

Universities aren’t helping themselves, however, when they hire hyper-specialized professors whose Ph.D.s are proof mainly that they have “bored down deeply into a small area.” And they aren’t helping themselves by teaching politicized courses that cut down great thinkers as racists, or sexists, or homophobes, and caricature the world outside the university as racist, or sexist, or homophobic. And they aren’t helping themselves by encouraging their students to learn not so much from texts—what can they teach about justice, or goodness, or beauty—as about them, the context into which authors and their distinctive ideas can be made to disappear. It’s rhetorical overreach to say, as Agresto does at one point, that the “liberal arts have died...by suicide.” But he makes a convincing case that the institutions are bleeding, in no small part, from self-inflicted wounds.

Defenders of the liberal arts would do well, Agresto thinks, to focus on their most easily understood aim of making students “smarter about things that matter.” That aim demands a kind of radicalism. People who wish to distinguish between slogans and solid truth need to “search out arguments and reasons rather than rest on received opinion.” Yet, Agresto reminds us, the attempt to liberate ourselves from received opinion can easily transform into sloganeering itself, an opportunity to tear worthy things down or to show how clever we are. Becoming smarter about things that matter therefore demands a
kind of conservatism. People who wish to distinguish between slogans and solid truth need to grasp that “civilization and culture didn’t spring up yesterday” and that wisdom isn’t the exclusive property of the rising generation. To think well about our present, we need to know as much as possible about “the ground from which our current culture and current problems grew.” Declaring that our constitutional system is broken, for example, requires understanding how it was supposed to work. That’s easiest to see in works like the Federalist Papers, written when the Constitution “still needed to be rationally argued for and defended.”

Radicalism and conservatism meet in the aim of “possessing the minds of those whose views and insights are different, even profoundly different, from our own.” Reading Plato can inspire radical doubts about democracy. Reading the Gospel of Matthew can inspire radical doubts about the way most of us live. At the same time, Agresto argues, liberal education can cultivate moderation because it “encourages us and our students to look back with openness and respect for possible guidance,” to notice that the problems we confront are rarely unprecedented, and to see “the most important questions from many sides.” Liberal education, Agresto bets, will more often be a “brake on” rather than an accelerant of dangerous enthusiasms. We should want democratic citizens to have the opportunity to possess the minds of great thinkers and writers, the better to possess their own minds, so that the next demagogue finds them hard nuts to crack.

Despite Agresto’s demoralizing title, he actually believes the decline of liberal education is “in part reversible.” Agresto urges us, among other suggestions, not to limit ourselves to the hope, vain in the short term, of changing “woke” departments. Liberal-arts advocates need to seek out allies among their colleagues in “business, law, medicine, and the sciences.” Those colleagues “often appreciate what [liberal-arts teachers] have and can do in raising up thoughtful, careful, and knowledgeable” graduates. Educators can also find allies—and donors—among those touched by liberal education, from alumni to adult learners drawn to executive seminars in the great books. The liberal arts have such allies because a liberal-arts education addresses the desire to know about the most important things. And this desire, The Death of Learning teaches us, is hard to kill.

Grose Point Blank

Screaming on the Inside: The Unsustainability of American Motherhood
By Jessica Grose
Mariner, 219 pages

Reviewed by Naomi Schaefer Riley

How hard is it to be a mother in America today? In her new book, Screaming on the Inside, the New York Times parenting columnist Jessica Grose acknowledges that some things are easier than they used to be—thanks to “antibiotics, motor vehicles, and indoor plumbing.” But everything else is harder because of the “amount of information we get about what we’re supposed to be doing, and how high the stakes are made to seem about every minor decision.”

Decisions about how much to work when children are young, whether to breastfeed, how to train your kids to sleep, what to feed them, where to send them to school, and whether to help with homework have been the subject of endless mommy wars. And Grose claims she would like to call a truce. “There is no sense of scale or context on the Internet,” she writes. And while most parents get at least some of their parenting information from online sources, what the “evidence on most topics shows is that there isn’t one way to be a good parent.” Indeed, she explains that in all her time writing for various mommy blogs, she “never wanted parents to feel bad about themselves” after reading her work. She “wanted them to feel capable and heard.”

So we should all be a little less judgmental. Except, of course, when we shouldn’t be. For instance, she writes, “anti-vaccine and anti-mask information spread like wildfire on social media during the pandemic and some of health misinformation’s major superspreaders were moms.” So this means, presumably,
that all the people who said masking children in schools was not only doing nothing to stop Covid but was also actively harming children's ability to learn are worthy of our scorn. Not to mention all the folks who said that vaccinating seven-year-olds was a complete waste of time, especially given the astoundingly low risks of Covid itself to these children.

Grose notes that “if the bar for ‘good mother’ was that your children felt safe and loved, it would be a much less stressful and soul-crushing proposition than our current American standards.” But here’s the thing: It’s exactly people like Jessica Grose who get to decide whether our children should be deemed loved or safe. And such decisions are hardly restricted to Covid protocols. If she found out that parents of her children’s friends had guns in their homes, that too would likely lead to a determination that those kids are less safe (and probably less loved) by her standards. Or what of the mothers who choose to send their children to schools with little diversity or who tell their kids to stop eating candy or they’ll get fat? Screaming on the Inside is filled with anecdotes about the harms of using the Internet for “body-shaming” (by photoshopping or posting pictures of women who are unreasonably thin) or how various sites don’t have enough racial diversity and make mothers who are not white feel unrepresented.

Certain kinds of judgment are just fine. They just have to be the right ones.

But it is not only the Internet that is creating problems for women. It is also, well, men. Because let’s face it: Men are running the companies where mothers are working or trying to work. And sometimes they say obnoxious things. And sometimes they don’t understand how hard it is to be a mother. And sometimes they don’t offer a job to mothers, or at least to Jessica Grose.

Grose got a new job right before she found out she was pregnant, and then she had debilitating morning sickness, which made her quit her job because she had not yet accumulated paid leave. After she had her first child, she applied for other jobs but did not receive “any reasonable offers.” She concludes: “I could only guess that my medical mishap—or possibly being a mom in general—was to blame.”

Perhaps, or perhaps there are other reasons Grose wasn’t hired. She doesn’t know, and neither do we. The good news is that then she was hired—by someone in charge of a small start-up who didn’t flinch when she told him in the interview that she planned to have another child. The job offered a good salary and enormous flexibility and the option to work from home. But apparently there were still problems. She was getting cc’d on emails that the CEO wasn’t responding to—even though she wasn’t in charge of the business side of the operation. She had to nudge the CEO to respond and smooth over communications with other members of the staff. All of this is “emotional labor;” a kind of work women have to do more than men. And it wasn’t fair. And so she quit that job, too.

In the same way that men are not doing enough of the work at work, in Grose’s estimation, they are also not doing enough of the work at home. And while Grose does not say that men and women need to split all the child care and housework exactly down the middle, she does believe that if men would pick up the slack already, women wouldn’t have it so hard.

And the government needs to do more, too. If there were a drinking game for books about motherhood—and I’m beginning to think there should be—you would have to do a shot every time they mentioned a Scandinavian country. Here’s one of Grose’s: “A study of three thousand women from Norway which has universal health care and paid sick leave showed three-quarters of women had taken at least one week of sick leave during their pregnancies...half of women needed between four and 16 full weeks away from work. This is what should be standard for American mothers.”

Like so many others writing on this topic, Grose is convinced that American mothers would be happier and more satisfied if the government guaranteed more money and benefits for mothers. But given that Grose thinks companies are already choosing not to hire young women because they may take a leave, how much worse would the problem be if the government told them they could take off as much as a year? This is one reason women in Scan-
CDAVINIAN COUNTRIES DON'T TEND TO RISE
AS HIGH IN THE CORPORATE RANKS AS
AMERICAN WOMEN DO.

AND YES, EVEN THOUGH MANY OF
THOSE COUNTRIES HAVE ALSO OFFERED
PAID PATERNITY LEAVE, THE TRUTH IS
THAT NOT AS MANY MEN TAKE ADVAN-
TAGE OF THESE PROGRAMS AS WOMEN
DO. AND ACCORDING TO MORE RECENT
INTERESTING RESEARCH, THOSE WHO DO
OFTEN HAVE FEWER CHILDREN. IN OTHER
WORDS, SPENDING MONTHS AT HOME
WITH AN INFANT DOESN'T EXACTLY MAKE
FATHERS WANT TO DO IT AGAIN. (THE
SAME WAS NOT TRUE FOR MOTHERS,
NECESSARY TO SAY.)

AND WHAT OF ALL THE FREE AND HEAV-
ILY SUBSIDIZED GOVERNMENT-RUN DAY
CARE IN THESE EUROPEAN COUNTRIES?
WOULDN'T AMERICAN MOTHERS BEN-
EFIT FROM SUCH A SYSTEM? WHY DO
FAMILIES HAVE TO SPEND SO MUCH OF
THEIR INCOME ON FINDING SOMEONE
TO WATCH THEIR KIDS? IT IS AN IRONY
APPARENTLY LOST ON JESSICA GROSE
THAT, IN A BOOK WHERE SHE SPENDS
PAGE AFTER PAGE LAMENTING HOW
PARENTS SUFFERED WHEN SCHOOLS WERE
CLOSED AS THE RESULT OF COVID LOCK-
DOWNS, SHE PLACES SO MUCH FAITH
IN THE GOVERNMENT'S BEING AVAILABLE
TO WATCH HER KIDS SO SHE CAN WORK.
OVER AND OVER, WE HEAR ABOUT HOW
WOMEN HAD TO LEAVE THE WORKFORCE
TEMPORARILY OR EVEN PERMANENTLY
TO CARE FOR YOUNG CHILDREN AT HOME,
AND HOW, FOR A YEAR OR EVEN TWO, THEY
HAD TO SUPERVISE ZOOM SCHOOL AND
PUT THEIR CAREER ON HOLD. BUT YES,
 BY ALL MEANS, YOU SHOULD ASSUME THAT
WE COULD DEVELOP A COMPETENT AND
CAPABLE UNIVERSAL CHILD-CARE SYSTEM
THAT WOULD PUT THE NEEDS OF WORKING
MOTHERS ABOVE, SAY, THE WHIMS OF
TEACHERS' UNIONS.

THE SUBTITLE OF GROSE'S BOOK IS
"THE UNSUSTAINABILITY OF AMERICAN
MOTHERHOOD." SHE CLAIMS THAT "WE
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ABLE WILL NOT CONTINUE IS TRUE HERE,
TOO. MOTHERS WHO FIND THAT THEIR
OWN INDIVIDUAL ARRANGEMENTS ARE NOT
WORKING WILL HAVE TO CHANGE THEM.
THEY WILL EITHER FIND A DIFFERENT JOB,
FIND OTHER CHILD-CARE ARRANGEMENTS,
MOVE TO A MORE AFFORDABLE HOME OR
TOWN, GET OTHER PEOPLE IN THEIR LIVES
TO PITCH IN MORE, OR APPLY FOR GOVER-
NMENT AID. WHETHER MOTHERS WILL
BECOME HAPPIER OR MORE SATISFIED WITH
THEIR LIVES IS ANOTHER STORY.

AND THIS IS WHERE GROSE IS TRULY
NAIVE ABOUT THE UNDERLYING CAUSES OF
THE STRESS SHE DESCRIBES SO VIVIDLY. IT
IS TRUE, AS SHE SAYS, THAT WOMEN FEEL
AS IF THEY ARE BEING ASKED BY SOCIETY
TO LIVE UP TO UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS
WHEN IT COMES TO THE AMOUNT OF TIME
THEY SPEND WITH THEIR CHILDREN, THEIR
ABILITY TO EXCEL AT THEIR JOBS, AND EVEN
THEIR ABILITY TO LOOK AND DRESS AS IF
THEY HAVE IT ALL UNDER CONTROL.

BUT THE CAUSE OF THIS STRESS ISN'T
JUDGMENTAL PEOPLE ON THE INTERNET. EVEN IF EVERY SUBSTACK AUTHOR
OR PODCASTER OR WOMEN'S-MAGAZINE
COLUMNIST OFFERED A TOTALLY NEU-
TRAL, NONJUDGMENTAL DESCRIPTION OF
MOTHERHOOD, THOSE LIVES WOULD STILL
BE STRESSFUL. WHY? BECAUSE HAVING
AN INFINITE NUMBER OF CHOICES ABOUT
HOW TO LEAD OUR LIVES AND DIVIDE
OUR TIME IS STRESSFUL. IT CAN EVEN
BE PARALYZING. AM I MISSING OUT ON
SOMETHING IMPORTANT AT WORK WHEN I
DECIDE TO LEAVE THE OFFICE EARLY TO
BE WITH MY KIDS?

IT IS NOT JUST Guilt DRIVING THESE
FEELINGS, AS GROSE SEEMS TO SUGGEST.
NOR IS FIXING THIS PROBLEM MERELY A
MATTER OF "LISTENING TO YOUR OWN
VALUES." THE ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS ARE NOT OBVIOUS. NOR CAN THEY
BE SETTLED. EVERY DAY, EVERY MONTH,
every year, women have to make
small and large choices about how
they are going to structure their
lives. WE HAVE MORE FREEDOM THAN
OUR GRANDMOTHERS AND GREAT-GRAND-
MOTHERS. BUT BECAUSE OF THEIR POLITICAL COMMITMENTS TO THE ENDLESS
BOUNTY OF WOMEN'S LIBERATION, JES-
SICA GROSE AND HER ILK WILL NEVER
ACKNOWLEDGE THAT FREEDOM IS A MIXED
BLESSING—AND THAT NO AMOUNT OF
GOVERNMENT AID OR POSITIVE INTERNET
CONTENT WILL CHANGE THAT.

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Commentary

HOLLYWOOD COMMENTARY

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away, or pretend you’re not part of the problem, like some celebrity jetting into Davos on a private jet to give a speech about climate change.

From the earliest days of Hollywood, kids were in trouble. Jackie Coogan made his debut at seven years old in Charlie Chaplin’s The Kid, and from that moment he became a superstar. He earned close to $4 million before he was 18, but by 1938 he was penniless. His mother and stepfather (of course!) were managing his career and finances.

In 1939, California passed the California Child Actor’s Bill, which aimed to protect the earnings of children in the movie business. Studios were required to sequester 15 percent of a child’s earnings in a special account. The law was called the Jackie Coogan Law, and the savings accounts are still called Coogan Accounts. It protects child performers from total financial ruin, but it doesn’t protect them from the kind of parents who drag them out of the Groucho Marx building by their wrists.

Jennette McCurdy was a player on a Nickelodeon comedy called iCarly, which ran from 2007 to 2012 and was a major success. McCurdy followed a familiar pattern for child stars. She appeared as a guest star on television shows, recorded a well-received album of country music, collected millions of followers on social media, and eventually sat down to write a memoir. All you really need to know about Jennette McCurdy’s time in the spotlight is the title of her memoir. I’m Glad My Mom Died is a blistering, acid-dipped account of her rise to stardom, told with remarkable humor and (despite its title) real sympathy for her monster of a mom.

I’m Glad My Mom Died is one-stop shopping for anyone interested in this kind of thing. It’s got it all: physical and sexual abuse, eating disorders, mental cruelty, alcoholism. It’s lurid and frank and told with real skill and style, but let’s face it: It’s not a new story. McCurdy’s mother was exactly the kind of person you imagine the mother of a pre-teen star of a Nickelodeon comedy would be: controlling, manipulative, living out her career disappointments through her child. It’s Gypsy, but a lot scarier and on basic cable.

I can only imagine that there were countless moments like mine, when I locked eyes with an angry dad outside my window. Countless moments when the producers and writers and executives surrounding iCarly looked the other way, ignored the crazy mom, told themselves it probably wasn’t that bad, and in general did what I did—and still do, to be honest—when I need a kid on screen.

They pretended they weren’t part of the problem. But if television is about the world and the world is filled with kids, and the California Child Actor’s Bill can’t do much about crazy parents, it’s hard to imagine that the Jackie Coogan story and I’m Glad My Mom Died won’t be repeated endlessly, as long as there’s a Hollywood.

Unless technology steps in and makes hiring real children unnecessary.

A “Deep Fake” is a piece of video that makes it look as if someone is doing and saying something he never did, by taking as much data as possible from images of that person—what those who are experts call the “data set”—and manipulating it in such a way that makes it look real. It’s still a fairly new technology, but the results get better and better. In the Avatar sequel, the 73-year-old Sigourney Weaver plays a 14-year-old girl. Granted, her character is half-CGI, but you get the idea: All you need is data—images of a person that can be crunched and manipulated and applied to the script at hand. You don’t need a new actor, or even one who is still alive. There’s enough extant footage of Jackie Coogan himself to Deep Fake a brand-new Jackie Coogan show on Disney Plus. And Jennette McCurdy could theoretically star in iCarly forever without ever having to step onto the set.

Why search for new faces when the old faces are in the server, ready to be downloaded? Why hire new child actors, and deal with their awful parents, when you can use the old ones, who have presumably already moved on with their lives and written their own versions of I’m Glad My Mom Died?

In the near future, Hollywood won’t have to abuse any more children. It can simply make Deep Fakes out of the kids it’s already abused.«
Why It’s Fine That She’s Glad Her Mom Died

ROB LONG

My first office at Paramount Studios was in the Lucille Ball Building, a two-story stucco box positively haunted with Hollywood history. On the second floor was a sprawling office paneled in baronial walnut. Jutting out over the studio alley was a sweeping bay window with leaded-glass panes. This, back when it was the RKO lot, was where then-studio mogul Joseph Kennedy would meet the actress Gloria Swanson for midday assignations.

When Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz bought RKO Studios in 1957, Lucy moved into that office. It was at the top of the staircase, according to legend, that she shouted down to Desi and demanded a divorce.

My history with that office is less dramatic, but still pretty showbizzy. For 11 years, the entire first floor was the production office for NBC’s long-running sitcom Cheers. The windows of the writers’ room opened up to a small walkway that led to the Groucho Marx Building, which housed several casting offices. Every day we’d see actors lining up for auditions, pacing in place and reciting their lines. And then a few moments later we’d see the same actors, now dejected and furious, heading to the parking lot muttering to themselves what psychologists call “negative self-talk.”

The worst moments involved children. The casting directors in the Groucho Marx Building were responsible for most of the television productions at Paramount, so you always knew when a show or a pilot needed a kid. They’d stand there and fidget while their parents fussed over their hair, their outfits, their focus. I need a stillness, I heard one parent hiss at her son, when she felt his pre-audition line reading wasn’t commanding enough. And then the sad walk out, the parent and child silently walking along the path—the child feeling the sting of rejection from a random adult, the parent trying hard to be cheerful even though that meant that the dance lessons ($100 each), the acting lessons ($150 per week), the audition-prep sessions ($75 per hour), and the makeup artist ($50) weren’t going to get recouped today.

I am so disappointed in you, I heard a parent explode at his daughter a few feet from my open window. They had been marching in tense silence from the door of a casting director, and I guess he couldn’t hold it in any longer. Whatever she had done in there, it wasn’t enough. Our eyes met through the screen and instead of shame, or defiance, he gave me a look that said, Hey, whaddya goin’ to do? Working with kids is a pain in the ass.

Like we were in this together. Like I was complicit in some way in what was (let’s face it) borderline child abuse.

Which, of course, I was. And, even today, still am.

TV shows are about the world, and the world is filled with kids. And when you hire kids, you hire the parents. And the parents, often, are monsters. Mostly what you do is look
Democracy Thrives in Israel

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

What are the facts?

Israel receives outsized condemnation for its alleged treatment of Arab-Israeli citizens, as well as Palestinian Arabs living in surrounding disputed territories. In stark contrast to such poorly supported accusations, the new “Democracy Index 2021” by EIU—the Economist Intelligence Unit—ranks Israel as one of the most thriving democracies in the world, scoring it higher than the United States, Spain, Italy and some 139 other nations. The index ranks countries according to 51 criteria, covering each nation’s performance according to its 1) electoral process and pluralism; 2) functioning of government; 3) political participation; 4) political culture; and 5) civil liberties.

Israel’s 2021 ranking shows consistent improvement in its democratic processes compared with the first such report in 2006, when the Jewish state ranked only 47. In the current report, Israel was lauded for its inclusion of an Arab party in today’s ruling government coalition.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Anti-Israel commentators usually neglect to acknowledge that Palestinians have been waging terrorist war against Israeli’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 mendacious 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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