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

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

Support Magen David Adom by donating today at afmda.org/give or call 866.632.2763.
The Commentary Magazine Podcast.

A DAILY REFLECTION ON THIS UNPRECEDENTED TIME.

If you aren’t joining us already, we invite you to listen.

Our podcasts post every day between 11 am and Noon eastern time.

Search for it on iTunes, Stitcher, or listen on our website at commentary.org

THE COMMENTARY MAGAZINE PODCAST
## Articles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sol Stern</td>
<td>The Truth Behind the Palestinian ‘Catastrophe’</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eli Lake</td>
<td>The Iraq War, 20 Years Later</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It wasn't the disaster everyone now says it was.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick Richman</td>
<td>When Netanyahu Spoke to Congress</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A controversy revisited.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Roberts</td>
<td>Paul Johnson, 1928–2023</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How a serious man changed the world.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Epstein</td>
<td>God, Literature, and Anton Chekhov</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can writing without judgment be great?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Politics & Ideas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan S. Tobin</td>
<td>Altermaniacal Delusions</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>We Are Not One</em>, by Eric Alterman</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Editor's Commentary
John Podhoretz

Politics & Ideas

BRIAN STEWART
Pitying Poor Putin
The Greatest Evil Is War,
by Chris Hedges

47

HARVEY KLEHR
Bridges to the Soviet Union?
Harry Bridges,
by Robert W. Cherny

49

NAOMI SCHEEGER RILEY
Bucking the Trends
What Is Wrong with Our Schools?,
by Daniel Buck

51

FREDERIC RAPHAEL
Waxing Roth
Endless Flight, By Keiron Pim

53

Monthly Commentaries

READER COMMENTARY
4
Letters
on the January issue

TECH COMMENTARY
8
James B. Meigs
Unlock the Grid

WASHINGTON COMMENTARY
11
Matthew Continetti
They Don’t Think Much of Biden

MEDIA COMMENTARY

Christine Rosen
About that African-American Studies Course...

13

JEWISH COMMENTARY

Meir Y. Soloveichik
Ilan Ramon and the Words That Soared

15

HOLLYWOOD COMMENTARY

Rob Long
Where to Put the Funny Word

56
The Future of the GOP

To the Editor:
JOHN PODHORETZ’S article on the state of the Republican Party is terrific (“GOPocalypse Now?” January). It explains quite fully what has happened to it over the past few years.

I do, however, disagree with Podhoretz’s characterization of the Democratic Party. Although wokeness, cancel culture, and elitism have monopolized Democrats’ attention and shifted the party’s focus away from the common man, it remains our option for moving forward. Climate change, health-care, the pursuit of science, and the general welfare are better addressed by a center-left party than by today’s Republicans. Democrats face their own set of challenges if they are to get back to their FDR roots. But Republicans need to go back even further—to the wisdom of Lincoln. Thank you for a great article.

BILL BYRNE
Hilton Head, South Carolina

To the Editor:
I SHARE JOHN Podhoretz’s horror at the influence Donald Trump has had, and continues to have, on the Republican Party. I am part of the Republican base, and I voted for Trump twice, holding my nose the second time. But I have learned a costly lesson. No matter the policies I may have had in common with the man, he possesses such a narcissistic, sickening character that ultimately everything he touches turns to dust.

I live in McLean, Virginia, and watched as Glenn Youngkin became our governor by distancing himself carefully from Trump in such a way that he would not excite Trump’s irrational hatred for non-loyalty and turn Trump into an enemy. It worked. By refusing to campaign with Trump and avoiding his name, he won easily and brought on many Democratic voters. This strategy is the GOP’s best chance for the future. The Republican leadership needs to join ranks, agree that Trump is an albatross, and work together to block his influence. The Trump faithful will always vote Republican, but Republicans need not let Trump fill the ballots with his personally chosen gang of losers anymore.

LYNDA WILSON
McLean, Virginia

To the Editor:
HOWARD HUSOCK wrote a thought-provoking article on Leopoldstadt (“Tom Stoppard and the Failure of Diasporism,” January) on March 2023.
ary). I feel as if it were written for Jewish and Gentile readers who, like me, are concerned about modern American anti-Semitism. Bringing Herzl’s Altneuland face to face with Veblen’s not currently well-known remarks about the contribution of the Diaspora to world culture recalls the truth of Amalek’s protean threat to the peace of mind of a religious Jewish quietist. We must take our hats off to Husock for commenting concretely on these points made by Stoppard’s timely, brilliant, and finely tuned drama. The play and the article remind us that Am Yisrael Chai is still a hopeful cry because of our tiny, but great and sovereign, Middle-Eastern Judenstaat.

Robert S. April
New York City

Howard Husock writes:

Robert S. April’s kind words underscore the tragic truth of Stoppard’s play: Diasporism is tempting owing to its periodic golden ages. Yet, as we see even in the U.S. that some of us dared to think of as a new Zion, Amalek lurks.

Military Educators

To the Editor:

Robert Ponsdiscio’s article about using retired military personnel in the classroom brought back vivid memories of my own experience with this idea (“From the Halls of Montezuma to the Halls of Central High,” January). I retired from the Navy as a captain in 1998. I was a submarine officer and com-
manded two nuclear submarines and the submarine base in Pearl Harbor. My last tour of duty was three years as a professor of naval science at MIT. And at Boston University, I taught a leadership course to my senior midshipmen. Interested in teaching math or science at the middle- or high-school level and knowing that I was going to retire in Northern Virginia, I researched the local requirements for an alternate teaching-certificate program. After learning the number of education credits required for various subjects, I enrolled in the relevant classes at Boston University. I got all the required credits and made straight A’s.

I then sent my résumé and Boston University transcripts to every middle- and high-school principal in Fairfax County. In time, I received only one reply thank me and letting me know that the school would keep my résumé “on file.” I even tried to get an interview with the principal at the Fairfax County high school I graduated from. He was apparently too busy.

I finally gave up and got another great job. Soon after, the Washington Post featured a front-page article noting that Fairfax County was very short on math and science teachers. I wrote a letter to the editor explaining my experience, and an investigative reporter responded, saying he wanted to look into my story. He reported back to me that the cover story for my rejections was that I was overqualified. He said the truth, however, was that they didn’t want to hire a military officer who might actually challenge the system and try to improve it.

To the Editor:

My own experience bolsters Robert Pondiscio’s argument. In 2005, I enlisted in the Marine Corps out of high school and spent five years on active duty. I have no training in childhood education, but I taught my five-year-old daughter how to read at roughly a second-grade level the summer before she started kindergarten. All it took was using the basic and obvious principles of phonetics. Now in first grade, she remains far and away one of the most literate children in her class, and perhaps even compared with kids a grade or two above her. It’s not rocket science. People who say otherwise are running a grift.

Chris Casberg
Madras, Oregon

To the Editor:

I agree with Robert Pondiscio that using veterans to teach in public schools is a very good idea. Ironically, many university departments of education now no longer teach future teachers how to teach at all. They teach everything else instead.

Veterans with their real-life experiences used to be very much sought after by school districts. If that’s no longer the case, it’s clearly the work of the long-politicized and corrupt teachers’ unions.

Jim Cox
Xenia, Ohio

Robert Pondiscio writes:

One of the best arguments for enlisting retired military personnel as teachers was made by that paragon of progressive education himself, John Dewey. “I believe that the school must represent present life,” he wrote over a century ago. Military service is a part of “present life” that is underrepresented in our schools. Dewey’s oft-quoted maxim is usually invoked to defend “hands-on” learning and other pedagogical fads. But it applies to our teacher corps. There’s no reason it should not include men and women who served our country honorably, and who gained essential skills and values that would be an asset to students. If our schools of education reject this notion—if they hold to the belief that they are an indispensable on-ramp to classroom success and should maintain control of the teacher pipeline—the onus is on them not just to say it, but to demonstrate it. Until then, there’s no reason not to allow veterans to continue their service: in the classroom.

To the Editor:

Christine Rosen does a superb job of exposing the arrogance and sophistry of the progressive media (“How Disinformation Journalists Practice Disinformation,” January). The journalists she writes about exacerbate deceit and division within the Fourth Estate, which was once a great hope for fairness and a level playing field in matters of public discourse.

Letters: March 2023

The Disinfo Beat
I am a retired career newspaperman. For over four decades, I witnessed journalism devolve slowly from a fact-finding enterprise into an advocacy trade. Among journalists, a fearless commitment to the public’s right to know has been supplanted by wokeness.

It’s hard to imagine that Russian disinformation—wherever it may actually exist—could be as devastating as American disinformation has been for the U.S. and its cherished institutions.

Dale McConnaughay
White Cloud, Michigan

To the Editor:

I admire Christine Rosen’s restraint and rationality in discussing the hypocritical disinformation police. She could easily have told us that journalists such as Ben Collins and Brandy Zadrozny are a major threat to our democracy—because they are. But in maintaining her own journalistic composure, she will gain a wider and receptive readership for this very important and insightful piece.

David Sager
Highland Park, Illinois

Christine Rosen writes:

I greatly appreciate Dale McConnaughay’s and David Sager’s comments. They are correct that the efforts of “disinformation” reporters are part of a broader movement in journalism away from the ideal of objectivity and toward open advocacy for one’s pet causes. Pure objectivity is impossible, of course; journalists are human beings with all of the attendant strengths and weaknesses. But objectivity is nevertheless an important ideal to pursue, however imperfectly. It is no surprise that such a move away from laudable journalistic standards and practices (such as checking one’s sources, striving for neutrality when writing about controversial issues, keeping one’s personal politics out of one’s stories, and making every effort not to become the story oneself) has coincided with a sharp decrease in public trust in the Fourth Estate. While the mainstream media goes all-in on such partisan practices, however, it is heartening to see a new generation of independent journalists launching their own publications, newsletters, and podcasts in an effort to restore integrity to a profession that, in the mainstream, has largely abandoned it.

Digital Downfall

To the Editor:

James B. Meigs has written an informative synthesis of the rise and fall of some reputed tech visionaries (“Twilight of the Tech Gods,” January). One area to monitor closely going forward is nanotechnology. We don’t know with any certainty how developments in that industry will ultimately affect ordinary humans.

All these technologies can either simplify or complicate life. This is evident in people’s choice of entertainment, living quarters, and means of transportation.

As a Boomer, I keep reminding myself of an old saying attributed to various wise icons: “Live simply, so that others may simply live.” We certainly don’t need more gadgets or more sophisticated weapons that destroy the environment and spread suffering to millions.

We just need to meet our basic necessities and enjoy nature in the company of others.

Susana M. Sotillo
Bloomfield, New Jersey

To the Editor:

In his January Tech Commentary column, James B. Meigs offers salient points on industries’ technocrats, but his commentary misses the big picture. Until society rejects technocracy writ large, there is little hope that CEO Media Worship will end.

In government, universities, and industry, technocracies’ creeping tendrils have slid to all corners of society. Sam Bankman-Fried is only the latest example of this trend. Before him, we had Anthony Fauci. The list goes on. The answer is a return to liberalism, à la Adam Smith, Friedrich Hayek, and others.

One of liberalism’s core tenets is humility, or the belief that we are fallible. If we accept this, we will see the risks inherent in elevating any individual to a godlike status—whether he’s a dictator, public health official, or benevolent executive.

Adam Smith maintained that he never knew “much good done by those who affected to trade for the common good.” He would’ve seen Bankman-Fried coming from a mile away. If we lean into this sentiment, maybe we would, too.

David Waugh
Managing Editor,
American Institute for Economic Research
MY PHONE BUZZED with an incoming text just before midnight on Christmas Eve. “ConEd Alert,” the message read. “Please conserve energy.” New York’s power grid was at the breaking point, our power company warned us, owing to “extreme cold, high energy use & interstate equipment problems.” To help stave off a blackout, we were advised, we should lower our thermostats and “postpone running appliances.”

Oh, and one more thing, Con Edison added: “We wish everyone safe & happy holidays.” Now, my home isn’t one where milk and cookies are left out for Santa or stockings are hung by the chimney with care. But we do enjoy having lights and heat during the holiday season. In the end, most New Yorkers squeaked through the emergency without losing power. In the Southeast, many households weren’t so lucky. Millions across North Carolina, Tennessee, and other states lost electricity. Some outages were caused by downed powerlines. In other cases, power companies deliberately cut off power to large groups of customers, a process known as “load shedding.” The utilities simply didn’t have enough electricity to go around.

Weather-related grid failures—resulting both from high and low temperatures—are a growing threat.

California residents suffered through power outages during a 2020 heat wave and barely dodged more rolling blackouts last summer. In 2021, a stretch of frigid weather in Texas triggered power failures that led to nearly 250 deaths. A Wall Street Journal investigation last year showed that prolonged blackouts from all causes have more than doubled since 2013.

After major energy shortfalls, officials often mumble something about “the increasing frequency of extreme weather events due to climate change.” These excuses fall flat. Yes, the weather outside was frightful this past Christmas—temperatures reached single digits. But that’s not unprecedented for my area. We generally get one or two hard cold snaps each winter. Even the southern U.S. can expect an Arctic blast every two or three years. So what made this cold wave a crisis rather than an inconvenience?

The problem isn’t the weather. It’s the power grid. Most of us take our electric power for granted. We might not understand how the grid works, but we assume the experts know what they’re doing. It turns out the experts are nervous as hell. “Everything is tied to having electricity, and yet we’re not focusing on the reliability of the grid,” Curt Morgan, CEO of the power-plant operator Vistra Corp., told the Journal. “That’s absurd, and that’s frightening.” The federal and regional agencies tasked with keeping the grid running smoothly keep issuing warnings: We don’t have enough power to cope even with normal swings in the

JAMES B. MEIGS is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a co-host of the How Do We Fix It podcast, and the former editor of Popular Mechanics.
weather, they say. More blackouts are coming.

Let that sink in. The U.S. leads the world in innovation: digital tech, pharmaceuticals, spaceflight... And yet our power sources are becoming undependable. The infrastructure that delivers that power to users is getting old and fragile. And it’s all part of the plan. I don’t mean that our power grid is the victim of some evil-mastermind conspiracy. What I mean is that the sorry state of our electrical system is the direct result of very deliberate, if mostly wrongheaded, policy decisions. For three decades, political leaders, regulators, and energy technocrats have been working to make our grid more efficient, more market-driven, and of course, greener. In the process, they’ve implemented a lot of innovative—one might even say, experimental—ideas about how the grid should operate. Most of these experiments aren’t working very well.

“Everybody talks about what I call the ‘could’ grid,” energy analyst Meredith Angwin told me. That’s the futuristic grid we could have, the one Biden talks about in speeches and that you read about on tech blogs. It will be powered by giant solar farms and offshore constellations of wind turbines. It will have long-distance transmission lines to shuttle power from, say, sunny Arizona to gloomy Chicago, and huge battery arrays to fill any gaps in supply. Angwin is the author of *Shorting the Grid: The Hidden Fragility of Our Electric Grid*. She writes that, while energy wonks and policymakers fantasize about the could grid, the actual grid—the one that’s delivering power to your home right now—is “going downhill.”

I’ve seen the problem first-hand where I live. Former New York Governor Andrew Cuomo pledged that the state would achieve “100 percent carbon-free electricity by 2040.” He committed to huge expenditures on wind and solar development. He shut down fracking and blocked new natural-gas pipelines. New York was “poised to adopt the country’s most ambitious climate targets,” David Roberts exulted at Vox. In a particularly deft display of political thuggery, Cuomo also orchestrated a plan to force the retirement of Indian Point, the big nuclear plant 40 miles north of New York City. The governor wanted New York to be the test case for the could grid, in other words.

It didn’t work. Before it was closed, Indian Point was making 25 percent of New York City’s electricity. It made more juice than all the state’s wind and solar facilities combined. That power was utterly reliable and carbon-free. Today, Indian Point is being cut up for scrap. But while it was headed to retirement, two new natural-gas plants were being built. (Cuomo might have tried to phase out natural gas, but the power companies knew they can’t make enough electricity without it.) So downstate New York now gets over 80 percent of its power from fossil fuels. Our carbon emissions have shot up. Electricity prices have climbed even more. And we still don’t have enough power for high-demand days. Hence those Christmas Eve texts.

How did we get into this mess? The problems started in the 1990s when federal officials launched a series of reforms meant to deregulate our power system. Under the traditional model, a vertically integrated utility owned most everything, from the generating plants to the power line running into your house. It was a government-approved monopoly: The state regulator approved the utility’s major infrastructure investments as well as the rates it is allowed to charge customers. Under this plan, utilities were generally guaranteed a modest but predictable profit. They had strong incentives to build a highly reliable grid, but not many incentives to lower prices. In fact, the relationship between regulators and utilities often tended toward cronyism. It was not a perfect system.

So, in 1999, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) issued a ruling encouraging alternatives to the traditional utility model. They created quasi-public agencies known as Regional Transmission Organizations (or RTOs) that supervise power distribution in regions made up of one or more states. (Not all states have made the switch; some still rely on traditional utilities.) Under this system, your power now comes from a whole array of companies. The RTO simply sets the ground rules for how they compete. If a new business thinks it can produce power competitively—from wind, solar, natural gas, whatever—it’s free to build a plant and start peddling watts.

For a free-market fan like me, this sounds promising. More competition should mean more innovation and lower prices, right? But far from simplifying energy markets, Angwin argues, the RTO model has led to “overlapping thickets of regulation.” The rules involving how companies buy and sell power are so byzantine that almost no one understands them—except insiders who shamelessly game the system. (Remember Enron? This was one of their rackets.) Worse, the RTO system creates perverse incentives that erode grid reliability.

Here’s why: The RTOs hold auctions in which power plants offer to sell their power in five-minute intervals. The companies that offer the cheapest power get the business, of course, while higher-priced producers have to take their generators offline. (Too much electricity on the grid is just bad as too little, so the RTO must exactly match power production and consumption on a second-by-second basis.) The auction system is a boon to solar and wind producers. Their panels
and turbines sit idle most of the time. But when the sun shines or the wind blows, they produce torrents of very cheap power that they can sell into the grid at a moment's notice. Nuclear and coal plants, on the other hand, are at their best producing steady “baseload” power 24/7. These plants lose money any time they have to throttle down.

The RTO auction system therefore rewards intermittent wind and solar producers while penalizing the baseload providers. This is one reason so many coal and nuclear plants have closed in recent years. For fans of the could grid, of course, this is exactly the point. To make the transition to renewable energy even faster, the federal government and most states also offer huge subsidies to wind and solar producers. (Fortunately, many policymakers are belatedly recognizing that nuclear power is a zero-carbon energy source and including it in subsidy programs. A better plan would be to reduce market-distorting subsidies across the board.)

The long-term trend is clear: As more of our power comes from intermittent renewables—and baseload power disappears—the grid gets harder to manage. Take California, which leads the nation in solar-power capacity. On sunny days, solar panels produce more power than the state needs. But then comes sundown. Suddenly, the grid needs all the power it can get. Since California has already shuttered almost all its coal plants—and all but one nuclear plant—it has only two options. One: Import power from nearby states (most of which do burn coal, which is why they have power to export). Two: Burn lots of natural gas.

Natural-gas plants are easier to crank up quickly to meet rising demand. And ever since the fracking revolution of the late aughts, gas is one of the cheaper sources of energy. That makes natural gas the dirty secret of the “renewable power” revolution: Since neither wind nor solar can be counted on to deliver power at all times, efforts to increase those sources also require building a backup network of gas-fired power plants. Advocates for “zero-carbon” power like to tout all the wind and solar resources the U.S. has added to the grid over the past two decades. They usually don’t mention that, over the same period, we’ve doubled the amount of gas we burn to make electricity.

Three decades ago, our power grid was based on a mix of dependable energy sources, mostly coal, gas, nuclear, and hydropower. If one source faltered, others could step up production. If we stay on our current path, we’ll have a grid that runs mostly on intermittent wind and solar combined with on-again-off-again natural-gas plants trying to keep up with wild swings in renewable output. We’ve eliminated our safety margin. And that ramping up and down of different power sources is hard on infrastructure. Power-plant components wear out faster; transformers overheat. Our grid is crumbling under the strain.

The growing reliance on natural gas also brings big risks. Coal plants keep piles of fuel sitting on site. Nuclear plants have months of fuel already in their reactors. But a natural-gas-fired power plant gets its fuel through a pipeline on a minute-by-minute basis. During the pandemic, we learned that just-in-time supply chains can be vulnerable to disruption. We need to recognize that making our entire power grid dependent on just-in-time gas deliveries is insanely reckless. During cold spells homeowners burn more gas for heating. That leaves power generators short of fuel just when they need it most.

What’s the answer? First, a big dose of realism. We can’t run the grid without baseload power plants. It’s great to retire dirty coal plants, but we need to replace them with other dependable power sources. That makes it critical to preserve our existing nuclear plants, and to speed up plans for building new ones. We also need to unwind the perverse incentives in our RTO networks; power companies should be rewarded, not penalized, for providing reliable energy. And let’s hack back the regulations that make it hard to build new powerlines, power plants, or pretty much any sort of infrastructure today.

In the end, the Christmas cold snap lasted only a couple of days. Worse ones will come. We’re the nation of Apple and SpaceX. We ought to be able to keep the lights on.
WASHINGTON COMMENTARY

They Don’t Think Much of Biden

MATTHEW CONTINETTI

When the Bureau of Labor Statistics announced on February 3 that the economy, beating market expectations, had created some 517,000 jobs the previous month, the White House hastily scheduled presidential remarks. Speaking to the press in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, Joe Biden took credit for the news. He ran through a list of positive statistics: 12 million new jobs since he became president; the lowest unemployment rate in 54 years; 3 percent GDP growth in the fourth quarter of last year; a revived manufacturing sector; and a slowing rate of inflation. “Put simply,” he said, “I would argue that the Biden economic plan is working.”

When Biden finished reading his prepared statement, a reporter struck a discordant note by asking the president whether he took any blame for inflation. Biden was offended. “Am I taking blame for inflation?” he asked, repeating the question as if it was something a crazy person would say. Then he denied responsibility. Inflation wasn’t his fault, he explained, “because it was already there when I got here, man.” When he was inaugurated, Biden went on, the U.S. economy was essentially a hellscapae: “We weren’t manufacturing a damn thing here.” Now all is well. “That’s why I don’t” assume culpability, Biden said, before turning to leave for an event in Pennsylvania.

The exchange, though brief, was nonetheless revealing. As he prepares to launch his reelection campaign, the 80-year-old Biden must convince the public that economic and social conditions have improved during his tenure—that, thanks to him, America has recovered from the supposed long dark night of the soul that it endured under his predecessor. Not only is Biden’s narrative of recovery misleading— inflation showed up not before, but months after, he moved into 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue—it is also unconvincing. Public-opinion data reveal a stunning divergence between the heroic and aggrandizing self-portrayal of Biden and his administration and the pessimistic and negative attitudes of the electorate. Biden can argue that his plan is working until his face turns blue. Right now, the American people disagree, and they don’t like him much, either.

The worst inflation in four decades has fostered a level of popular discontent not seen for a generation. Though the rate of inflation may be falling, price increases continue to outpace wages, resulting in a decline in living standards that is about to enter its third year. The headlines may advertise national growth and employment, but individual voters are struggling and dissatisfied. Sixty-four percent of Americans in the January 29 NBC News poll said that their family income can’t keep up with the cost of living. In the Pew Research Center poll released on January 31, 78 percent of American adults said that economic conditions are poor. Three-quarters of Americans told Pew that they are “very concerned” about the price of food and consumer goods. Forty percent said they expect the economy to grow worse over the coming year.

Since 1986, pollsters for the Washington Post

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

Commentary
and ABC News have asked respondents whether their livelihoods have improved since the most recent president’s inauguration. According to the February 5 Post/ABC News poll, 41 percent of Americans say they are worse off than they were when Biden took office. That is the highest level ever. In a CBS News/YouGov poll also released on February 5, 61 percent of Americans rated the economy “bad,” and 62 percent expected the economy next year to be in either a recession or a slowdown.

Such feelings are widespread and durable. In eight of the nine NBC News surveys conducted since October 2021, more than 70 percent of the public has said the country is on the wrong track, making for the longest streak of national unhappiness in over 30 years. According to CBS News/YouGov, 68 percent of Americans say things are going badly.

Economic insecurity is the primary cause of Biden’s middling to poor job-approval ratings. At the time of writing, Biden is at 43 percent approval in the FiveThirtyEight polling average. His ratings on the economy and inflation are much worse. The January NBC News poll gave him a 36 percent approval rating on the economy. The February Post/ABC News poll had him at 37 percent on the economy. The CBS News/YouGov poll from the same month had his economic approval at 38 percent. CBS and YouGov asked respondents separately whether they approved of Biden’s handling of inflation. Thirty-four percent said yes.

War weariness may be eroding Biden’s numbers as well. The polling contains danger signs for those Americans, like me, who support continued military and financial assistance to Ukraine in its defense against Russia’s invasion. Biden’s marks on foreign policy are not much better than his economic scores. Forty-one percent approved of his foreign policy in the NBC News poll. Thirty-eight percent approved of his handling of Ukraine in the Post/ABC News poll. His rating on Ukraine in the CBS News/YouGov poll was a bit higher, at 46 percent, but it still did not command majority support. When asked whether America should provide more aid to Ukraine, adults in the NBC News poll agreed, 49 percent to 47 percent. That slim two-point margin is troubling for Ukraine, and for the world.

It is hard to separate the worries of Americans over the domestic and international scene from their assessments of Biden’s personal capacities and attributes. While 45 percent of Americans told NBC News that Biden is easygoing and likable, and 42 percent said that he is knowledgeable and experienced, they did not have many more compliments to offer. Just 34 percent rated Biden honest and trustworthy, 31 percent said he’s competent and effective, 28 percent said he is mentally and physically fit for office, and 23 percent said he has united the country. In an AP/NORC Center for Public Affairs poll released on February 6, 23 percent of Americans said that they have “a great deal” of confidence in Biden’s management skills, 21 percent said that they are confident in his leadership ability during a crisis, and a pathetic 15 percent said that they are confident he will achieve his goals.

Most Democrats do not want Biden to run for a second term. Fifty-eight percent of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents told Post/ABC News pollsters that they would rather have another nominee in 2024. The figure hasn’t budged in months. Sixteen percent of Democrats said they were enthusiastic about another four years of Biden. In the AP/NORC poll, 37 percent of Democrats wanted Biden to run again. The percentage was 52 percent last November. “Follow-up interviews with poll respondents,” wrote correspondents Josh Boak and Hannah Fingerhut, “suggest that many believe the 80-year-old’s age is a liability, with people focused on his coughing, his gait, his gaffes, and the possibility that the world’s most stressful job would be better suited for someone younger.”

Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the play? The ingenuous and ham-handed way that Biden has dealt with the classified materials from throughout his career that in recent months have been recovered from his onetime office and from his home displays those traits that most Americans find objectionable about him. Entranced by macroeconomic figures and by legislative accomplishments whose benefits are amorphous and dispersed, Joe Biden, his team, and his allies in the political class are blind to the incongruity between their official statements and everyday experience. That is not a good situation for an incumbent president.
FLORIDA GOVERNOR Ron DeSantis announced in January that his state would not allow the use of the College Board’s Advanced Placement course in African-American history in its current form, citing its promotion of ideologically questionable material. The mainstream media’s first responders were quick to craft a narrative: There was nothing wrong with the course, and DeSantis was a racist monster for even suggesting that there was.

Jennifer Rubin of the Washington Post, who had evidently not bothered to look at the course curriculum in question, wrote of DeSantis, “He’s gone full-blown white supremacist,” claiming further, “The goal here is unmistakable: eradication of African American historical experience.”

Other outlets echoed Rubin. National Public Radio interviewed an academic (who had helped develop the curriculum for the course) who claimed, “There’s nothing particularly ideological about the course except that we value the experiences of African people in the United States.”

NPR followed up with several stories that prominently featured critics of DeSantis, including the NAACP’s “director of education innovation,” who denounced Florida’s “reprehensible whitesplaining of Black Studies.”

The choice of language was notable: Journalists used words such as “assault,” “attack,” “authoritarian,” “suppression,” and “erasure” over more neutral and objective descriptors. Perhaps the most over-the-top fulminations came courtesy of Jan-Werner Müller, a teacher at Princeton. Writing in the Guardian, he claimed that the “rightwing governor of Florida” was engaged in “systematic intimidation campaigns” meant to prevent children from becoming “fearless, critical citizens.”

Then some non-mainstream analysts, notably Stanley Kurtz at National Review, got hold of the actual AP course materials and revealed just how questionable (and how averse to debate on controversial subjects) they were. These leaned heavily on left-wing (and even Marxist) interpretations throughout, but the ideological slant was particularly egregious in Unit 4 of the course. Here, students would learn about reparations for slavery in an entirely one-sided fashion, since the reading materials, among them an essay by Ta-Nehisi Coates and the text of proposed legislation for reparations, only made the case for reparations.

Unit 4 also featured many readings about the Black Lives Matter movement (again with no alternative viewpoints to counter BLM’s calls for the abolition of prisons and policing). Unit 4 also included a section on “Black Queer Studies,” including the study of “the concept of the queer of color critique, grounded in Black feminism and intersectionality” as well as a section on “Intersectionality and Activism,” which included readings by Kimberlé Crenshaw, the self-described doyenne of that very thing the mainstream media has claimed was not being taught in K–12 public schools: Critical Race Theory.

Presented with clear evidence of ideological bias, the media narrative quickly pivoted to claim that, in fact, the politicized material was good for students. Politico asked contributor Joshua Zeitz to assess the AP course (in a story illustrated with an image of protestors

Christine Rosen is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.
in Florida waving BLM signs that read “Stop the Black Attack”). Although he acknowledged the radical nature of much of the material, Zeitz dismissed concerns about it as merely the petty worries of white people: “To be sure, many culture warriors will object to topics and texts that strike most people as unproblematic. Voices like Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, Ta-Nehisi Coates and bell hooks offend the sensibilities of some white Americans.”

But such offensiveness was the point, according to this new line of reasoning: “Why would you teach these topics to 17-year-olds? Are they not in fact...‘woke?’ The answer to this last question is a resounding: Yes! Also: So what?” Zeitz argued. “That’s the point. They’re complicated works of sociology and philosophy. They’re highly contested polemics. We read them to sharpen our capacity for analysis and argument. Contra Gov. DeSantis, being assigned a text is not an exercise in indoctrination.”

Politico’s conflation of critical theory and critical thinking is a common error in the mainstream media. In his criticism of the AP course materials, DeSantis drew a crucial distinction between exposure to challenging ideas and indoctrination. The AP course as initially conceived did not include alternative views about any of these controversial subjects. How can you foster debate on issues when only one side is presented?

But journalism’s fangirling of dubious CRT theories became clear when the College Board announced it would be revising the curriculum to remove some of the more questionable elements. (College Board CEO David Coleman claimed that the revisions came because of feedback from educators, not as a direct response to DeSantis’s criticism.) It also added new sections such as “The Growth of the Black Middle Class” and even allowed students the option of studying the debate over affirmative action and the work of conservative black intellectuals.

The New York Times, which has already fully committed itself to a CRT-inspired vision of American history via its “1619 Project,” ran a story with the headline “The College Board Strips Down Its A.P. Curriculum for African American Studies.” Rather than than use a more apt word—“revises”—the Times chose a more violent phrase—“stripped down.”

The story describes the new AP course as having “purged the name of many Black writers and scholars.” Among the “purged” was Kimberlé Crenshaw, who told the Times she was disappointed by the revisions because she thinks high-school students are eager for “ways of thinking about things like police brutality, mass incarceration, and continuing inequalities.” In an earlier version of the article, later stealth-edited, the Times quoted Crenshaw as claiming that CRT and intersectionality represent the “true history” of the United States: “For it [the AP course] to be true to the mission of telling the true history, it cannot exclude intersectionality, it cannot exclude critical thinking about race.”

NBC News also gave plenty of space to the complaints of angry activists, many of whom falsely claimed that DeSantis was trying to “erase” black history. The more controversial subjects that had been given one-sided presentations in the proposed curriculum (reparations, BLM, queer theory, intersectionality, CRT) have not been banned but are now optional themes students may choose to study for end-of-year-projects, rather than mandated elements of the curriculum.

Nevertheless, NBC featured a “community activist” who had majored in African-American history: “How,” he ventilated, “can you label a people and their history of no value?” The NBC reporter helpfully added, “DeSantis’s crusade on diversity and race comes in a state colonized by the Spanish, where the intersections of Black, Latino, and Indigenous culture and history abound.”

All of this is further evidence of the mainstream media’s continued inability to offer a fair-minded or mildly nuanced examination of stories around race—and the revolution in consciousness many argue the media should undergo as a result of race. In June 2020, the journalist Wesley Lowery published a piece in the New York Times arguing that the idea of objectivity is not a useful ideal but merely a mask for white privilege: “The mainstream has allowed what it considers objective truth to be decided almost exclusively by white reporters and their mostly white bosses.”

Less than three years later, former Washington Post executive editor Leonard Downie Jr.—who once so embrace the notion of “objectivity” that he openly proclaimed he did not vote—argued that newsrooms should “move beyond objectivity” since “reporters, editors and media critics argue that the concept of journalistic objectivity is a distortion of reality. They point out that the standard was dictated over decades by male editors in predominantly White newsrooms.” Or, as one of the advocates of such a shift put it more succinctly: “The consensus among younger journalists is that we got it all wrong,” Emilio Garcia-Ruiz, editor in chief of the San Francisco Chronicle, said. “Objectivity has got to go.”

Post–George Floyd journalism takes as its starting point the radical notion that colorblindness is not only impossible but actively harmful; that Critical Race Theory is the best lens through which all race issues can be properly understood; and that the goal of objective reporting masks a lurking white supremacy. No wonder that is how they viewed the story about DeSantis and AP African-American history. With their false and defamatory coverage of the matter, they have shown why this new standard is so dangerous.»
ABBI HANINA ben Teradyon was executed by the Romans following the fall of the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 C.E. As he was burned alive while holding a Torah in his hands, his students asked their teacher what he saw. He responded, "Gevilin nisrafin ve-oitiot porchat: The physical parchment is incinerated, but the letters themselves fly unaffected into the air. This is one of the most resonant tales of Jewish eternity, a sublime and succinct summation of the inability of our enemies to destroy us, and the connection between the Jewish faith—embodied by the Hebrew letters—and the miraculous endurance of our people.

I thought about this story when I watched a scene in the PBS documentary *Space Shuttle Columbia: Mission of Hope* about the life and death of Israeli pilot and astronaut Ilan Ramon, who perished when the shuttle exploded upon reentry in 2003 and whose 20th *yahrzeit*, or Hebrew anniversary of death, is now being marked.

More than two decades before *Columbia*, Ramon had first become bound up with the miraculous tale of the Jewish people. As a young man, he had served in the daring and essential Osirak operation, destroying Iraq’s nuclear reactor. While preparing for his mission, Ramon trained and worked with an Israeli scientist and Holocaust survivor by the name of Yoachim Yosef. He noticed a miniature Torah scroll on the shelf in Yosef’s office. Later, on a live broadcast while in orbit, Ramon held it up and told his country, “This is a tiny Torah scroll that, 60 years ago, a young boy received from a Dutch rabbi, who taught him for his bar mitzvah; and now, it is with me in space.”

Yosef had been the boy. Ramon went on to call Rabbi Simon Dasberg’s Torah a *hut hevel mekasher me’od meragesh*—a very emotionally resonant tie that binds—and said it represents “the ability of the Jewish people” to endure. For one startling moment, Ramon

Meir Y. Soloveichik is the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City and the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University.

Commentary
released the Torah from his hands and it began to float further toward the heavens. In the documentary, Yosef explains that Dasberg had given him the scroll in Bergen-Belsen and instructed him to “tell the story” of what had occurred. Yosef felt he had not yet fulfilled his mission, and that Ramon had made it possible for him to do so. And then, tragically, the Columbia erupted upon reentry.

But the story of Ramon did not end there. This year, Eitan Stibbe, a former comrade-at-arms of Ramon and a successful Israeli entrepreneur, purchased a ride aboard Elon Musk’s SpaceX, thus becoming the second Israeli in space. In describing, on his website, what items he would be taking aboard with him, Stibbe posted images of pages of Ilan Ramon’s diary. These pages somehow survived the destruction of Columbia and were discovered in a field in Texas. The wonder of their continued existence has been described by the Israeli forensics expert Sharon Brown, who first examined them: “Papers that were white with black handwriting on it—they were a bit tattered and traumatized, but nothing like you’d imagining from the huge explosion that took place 40 miles up in the sky and then being hurtled down to earth. It was truly amazing.” The pages burned, but the letters survived.

I had the opportunity to ponder the pages of Ramon’s diary more carefully when Stibbe posted images of the pages on his website. Here before me were arrayed two papers of very different natures, each charred, with some words missing. One clearly describes the wonder of liftoff: “shemonah dakot, ve’od shniyot…anahnu bahalal”—eight minutes and a few more seconds…and we are in space. The man who had experienced more aviation than most, and who had participated in one of the most daring air raids in history, could not contain his wonder at the launch.

On the other page were words of a very different sort. Knowing that he would be spending Shabbat in space, Ramon had brought with him the words of the kiddush, the traditional Friday-night blessing over sacred time: “Blessed art Thou…who sanctifies us with His commandments…and You gave us in love this Sabbath day…a remembrance of act of creation…first among sacred days, a remembrance of the Exodus of Egypt.”

In The Lonely Man of Faith, Rabbi Soloveitchik urges modern society to remember that a world solely defined by technology would leave us less connected, not more; only in a faithful covenantal community are we truly linked to those who have come before and those who follow. Studying both pages, I realized that I was seeing a simple and sublime summation of one of the great works of Jewish thought: Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik’s The Lonely Man of Faith. Composed during the space race, The Lonely Man of Faith ponders two aspects of human nature that are equally ingrained with us. The first is the urge for invention, which has glorious and life-affirming results: “Man of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who needed several days to travel from Boston to New York was less dignified than modern man who attempts to conquer space, boards a plane at the New York airport at midnight and takes several hours later a leisurely walk along the streets of London.” Or, as Ilan Ramon might have put it, eight minutes, a few seconds...and we are in space.

Yet Rabbi Soloveitchik urges modern society to remember that a world solely defined by technology would leave us less connected, not more; only in a faithful covenantal community are we truly linked to those who have come before and those who follow. The man of faith “finds deliverance from his isolation in the ‘now,’” because a covenantal community cuts across the centuries, indeed millennia, of calendric time and unites those who already played their part, delivered their message, acquired fame, and withdrew from the covenantal stage quietly and humbly with those who have not yet been given the opportunity to appear on the covenantal stage and who wait for their turn in the anonymity of the “about to be.”

So Rabbi Soloveitchik wrote, and suddenly arrayed virtually before me were exquisite embodiments of his themes: one page about the wonder of orbiting the earth in a few minutes of time, and one page describing the desire of Jews throughout eternity to experience sacred time and unite ourselves with those who come before. Thus it was that, as Eitan Stibbe took off on SpaceX, the pages of Ilan Ramon’s diary accompanied him, orbiting the earth until they safely returned. The paper burned, but the letters soared. The pages of a diary that survived an inferno now took flight once more, as the man who sanctified God’s name in the very heavens lived again.

March 2023
ISRAEL WILL SOON celebrate the 75th anniversary of its independence. Around the same time, Palestinians will stage their annual Nakba Day, the official commemoration held every year on May 15 to protest Israel’s creation. The marking of this supposed “catastrophe” (nakba) will surely be a key feature of the elite media discussion of Israel’s anniversary. As such, it will represent an ongoing public-relations triumph for the Palestinians—and a victory for deceit and disinformation.

For the past quarter century, leaders of the Palestinian Authority have been insistent that their people were innocent victims of a historically unprecedented crime in 1948, a crime that is frequently mentioned in the same breath as the Holocaust. Their account is an example of the phenomenon called the “big lie.” Indeed, it is perhaps the most persistent big lie of the past 75 years. But attention must be paid, since this putatively solemn act of national remembrance will likely be used to launch violent demonstrations against the Jewish state.

Sol Stern, an American and Israeli citizen, has been writing about Israel for 50 years.
The Nakba narrative depicts the founding of Israel as a catastrophe that resulted in the dispossession of the land’s native people. Yasser Arafat, then the president of the PA, invented Nakba Day on May 15, 1998, just as Israel was celebrating its 50th anniversary. From his West Bank headquarters, Arafat read out marching orders for the day over PA radio stations and public loudspeakers:

The Nakba has thrown us out of our homes and dispersed us around the globe. Historians may search, but they will not find any nation subjugated to as much torture as ours. We are not asking for a lot. We are not asking for the moon. We are asking to close the chapter of Nakba once and for all, for the refugees to return and to build an independent Palestinian state on our land, our land, our land, just like other peoples.

Nine Palestinians were killed that day. Hundreds more (including some Israelis) died during Nakba Day riots over the subsequent quarter century.

Yet it wasn’t the deadly violence that made the first Nakba Day historically significant. Rather, at a time when the 1993 Oslo peace accords remained in force and still offered an opportunity to achieve a “two-state solution” to the conflict, Arafat decided to weaponize the Palestinian narrative into a declaration of permanent war against Israel. The key element of his Nakba Day speech was his claim that there were 5 million Palestinian refugees who had a sacred “right of return” to their homes in Jaffa, Haifa, and dozens of formerly Arab cities, towns, and villages in Israel.

In three-plus decades as Palestinian leader, Arafat failed to accomplish anything constructive for his people. But Nakba Day did advance his goal of prolonging the celebrated struggle against Zionism.

Their fellow members of Congress need not worry about the danger of Nakba denial. The problem is the reverse. All too many perfectly sensible people, including quite a few liberal Israelis, seem willing to ignore the deadly implications of the Nakba narrative for fear of being accused of insensitivity to another people’s suffering.

If “nakba” merely means catastrophe, then the word is a fitting one. Unquestionably, Palestinians suffered a terrible human tragedy in 1948. Around 700,000 men, women, and children lost their ancestral homes, and Palestinian civil society disintegrated. The refugees dispersed to the Jordanian-occupied West Bank, the Egyptian-occupied Gaza Strip, and neighboring Arab countries. Ninety percent have since passed away, but around 2 million of their progeny languish in dismal refugee camps. After 75 years, this giant remnant should be resettled in new housing and compensated in Israel. Abbas even offered an updated version of the Nakba last summer when he publicly declared, in Germany, that the Palestinians had suffered the equivalent of “50 Holocausts” at the hands of the Jews.

Hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Palestinians will express their rage over Israel’s existence by joining Nakba Day riots in May. We can also expect an upsurge of support for the 25th annual Nakba commemoration from the international leftist coalition that celebrates the Palestinians as unique victims of Western racism, colonialism, and Zionist perfidy. In street demonstrations and on college campuses, activists will be chanting the slogan that sums up the final goal of the Nakba narrative: “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.”

The Nakba has even entered the halls of the U.S. House of Representatives through a resolution authored by Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib and endorsed by six of her Democratic Party colleagues. The resolution calls on the U.S. government to “commemorate the Nakba through official recognition and remembrance” and to “reject efforts to enlist, engage, or otherwise associate the United States Government with denial of the Nakba.”

In this context, Nakba Day stands as a cultural assault on the American soul. As such, it is a danger to the very survival of the United States and the Jewish people. If we allow Nakba Day to go unchallenged, we risk losing sight of the ultimate goal: peace in the Middle East. For that reason, we must work together to ensure that Nakba Day becomes a thing of the past, and that the Nakba narrative is silenced for good.
for their losses. Resettlement is exactly how every other refugee catastrophe after World War II (including a total of 13 million refugees in Europe alone) was solved.

But the Nakba has more than one meaning. The version now promoted by Palestinian leaders and their supporters assigns exclusive blame for the 1948 catastrophe to the Jews, while proposing an absurd remedy that would mean suicide for the Jewish state. And that is actually what the Palestinian narrative means now.

Supporters of Israel are often asked to prove their decency by acknowledging the reality of the Nakba. There’s no reason to shrink from that challenge. What’s needed is a serious forensic examination of the various Palestinian narratives, their truths, falsehoods, and their hatreds. The place to begin that inquiry is with the very first Nakba text, published in Beirut 75 years ago.

II.

ON AUGUST 5, 1948, not quite three months after the new state of Israel was invaded by five Arab armies, a short volume titled Maana al-Nakba (later translated as The Meaning of the Disaster) appeared in Beirut to popular acclaim. The author was Constantine K. Zurayk, a distinguished professor of Oriental history and vice president of the American University of Beirut.

Zurayk was the wunderkind of the Arab academic world. Born in Damascus in 1909 to a prosperous Greek Orthodox family, he was sent off at 20 to complete his graduate studies in the United States. Within a year he had obtained a master’s from the University of Chicago. One year later, he added a Ph.D. in Oriental languages from Princeton. He then returned to Beirut and the American University.

Zurayk soon became one of the leading advocates of the liberal, secularist variant of Arab nationalism. After Syria won its independence in 1945, he was chosen to serve in the new nation’s first diplomatic mission in Washington, D.C., and also served with the Syrian delegation to the United Nations General Assembly.

Zurayk’s book reflected the sense of outrage among the Arab educated classes over the 1947 UN partition resolution and the creation of the Jewish state. Zurayk’s anger was even more personal, since he had participated in the UN deliberations on the Palestine question. His 70-page book then became a reference point for future pro-Palestinian historians and writers. Yoav Gelber, a prominent Israeli historian of the 1948 war, cited Zurayk’s work when he told me he didn’t think there was much new in Arafat’s 1998 Nakba Day declaration. “The Nakba was at the basis of the Palestinian narrative from the beginning,” Gelber said. “Constantine Zurayk coined the phrase in 1948.”

In previous writings about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, I wasn’t able to comment on Zurayk’s book. A limited-edition English translation of Maana al-Nakba appeared in Beirut in 1956, but it was never published in the United States. It was only recently that I found a rare copy in a university library and finally read the real thing.

It was not what I expected. The Meaning of the Disaster actually isn’t about the tragedy of the Palestinian people. According to Zurayk, the crime of the Nakba was committed against the entire Arab nation—a romantic conception of a political entity that he and his fellow Arab nationalists fervently believed in. And, it turns out, Zurayk was no champion of an independent Palestinian state.

In an introductory paragraph, Zurayk writes about “the defeat of the Arabs in Palestine,” which he then calls “one of the harshest of the trials and tribulations with which the Arabs have been afflicted throughout their long history.” Zurayk’s only comment about Palestinian refugees is that, during the fighting, “four hundred thousand or more Arabs [were] forced to flee pell mell from their homes.” (All italics added.)

Zurayk predicted that all Arabs would continue to be threatened by international Zionism: “The Arab nation throughout its long history has never been faced with a more serious danger than that to which it has today been exposed. The forces which the Zionists control in all parts of the world can, if they are permitted to take root in Palestine, threaten the independence of all the Arab lands and form a continuing and frightening danger to their life.”

The Arabs also faced the immense power of Western imperialism, according to Zurayk, but this would prove merely a “temporary evil.” On the other hand, “the aim of Zionist imperialism is to exchange one country for another, and to annihilate one people so that another may be put in its place. This is imperialism, naked and fearful in its truest color and worst form.”

Zurayk not only insists that Jews have no national rights in Palestine, but he denies the historic connection between the Jewish people and the ancient land of Israel. “The Zionist Jews who are now immigrating to Palestine,” he writes, “bear absolutely no relation to the semitic Jews.” To buttress this fake history, Zurayk dredges up the discredited theory that the Eastern European Jews were descended from Khazar tribes that converted to Judaism in the eighth century.

Still, Zurayk is left to wonder how the combined Arab armies, far outnumbering the Jews, could have allowed the Zionists to achieve their military objectives
in Palestine. His answer, rife with anti-Semitic canards and conspiracy theories, is worth quoting at length:

The causes of this calamity are not all attributable to the Arabs themselves. The enemy confronting them is determined, has plentiful resources, and great influence. Years, even generations, passed during which he prepared for this struggle. He extended his influence and his power to the ends of the earth. He got control over many of the sources of power within the great nations so that they were either forced into partiality toward him or submitted to him.

Zionism does not only consist of those groups and colonies scattered in Palestine; it is a worldwide network, well prepared scientifically and financially, which dominates the influential countries of the world, and which has dedicated all its strength to the realization of its goal, namely building a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine.

Zurayk's liberal, secular version of nationalismo was partly nurtured in the United States, where he lived for several years. But there's nothing liberal about Zurayk's understanding of Jews and Zionism. His observations about American Jews might have been written in the 1930s by Henry Ford or Father Charles Coughlin:

No one who has not stayed in that country [the U.S.] and studied its conditions can truly estimate the extent of this power or visualize the awful danger of [Zionism]. Many American industries and financial institutions are in the hands of the Jews, not to mention the press, radio, cinema and other media of propaganda, or Jewish voters in the states of New York, Illinois, Ohio and others which are important in presidential elections, especially these days when the conflict between Democrats and Republicans is at a peak.

Not content with depicting Jews as devious manipulators of power and wealth, the secularist Zurayk also ventures into the realm of theology to offer his readers a grotesque slander of Judaism. “The idea of a ‘chosen people,’” he writes, “is closer to that of Nazism than to any other idea and [in the end] it will fall and collapse just as Nazism did.”

Zurayk was celebrated by his academic peers as a great scholar who prophetically urged the Arabs to modernize and embrace science. Those values supposedly distinguished his views from retrograde Islamism. But it’s hard to see how an Islamist could have gone much further in demonizing the Jews and Zionism.

Following his Nakba book, Zurayk’s academic career prospered. He eventually became rector of the Syrian University in Damascus and held appointments as a visiting professor at Columbia University, Georgetown University, and the University of Utah. Zurayk also served a five-year term as president of the International Association of Universities. In 1988 the State University of New York Press published a Festschrift in Zurayk’s honor, with essays by 18 leading Arab scholars. The volume contained hardly a word about his scandalously anti-Semitic book Maana al-Nakba—a book that is not about the Palestinians at all.

III.

CONSTANTINE ZURAYK’S fiction that the “Arab nation” suffered the Nakba didn’t survive for long. In the June 1967 Arab–Israeli war, three Arab states again attempted to undo Zionism. When they failed and lost even more territory to Israel, the Arab coalition to destroy Israel fell apart. Two of those countries eventually signed a separate peace with the Jewish state. Pan-Arab nationalism was dead.

The meaning of the Nakba had already changed as Palestinian activists and historians began depicting the events of 1948 exclusively as a tragedy for their own people. In the mid-1950s, Aref el-Aref, a noted Palestinian journalist, historian, and mayor of East Jerusalem during the Jordanian occupation, published a six-volume history of the Palestinian struggle titled The Nakba of Jerusalem and the Lost Paradise. Many more Nakba books with an exclusively Palestinian focus were published over the next four decades, including several highly praised novels.

The most influential of those volumes, particularly for audiences in the West, was Edward W. Said’s The Question of Palestine, published in 1979. Said, a popular Columbia University English professor and a member of the Palestinian National Council, was something of an icon in liberal intellectual circles because of his earlier book, Orientalism. In that work, Said framed the history of colonialism in the Arab and Islamic world within a system of Western racist thought.

In The Question of Palestine, the author argued that the game was stacked against the native Palestinians in favor of the white Zionists, because of the same dominant racist ideologies. Said denounced
“the entrenched cultural attitude toward Palestinians deriving from age-old Western prejudices about Islam, the Arabs, and the Orient. This attitude, from which in its turn Zionism drew for its view of the Palestinians, dehumanized us, reduced us to the barely tolerated status of a nuisance.”

“Certainly, so far as the West is concerned,” Said continues, “Palestine has been a place where a relatively advanced (because European) incoming population of Jews has performed miracles of construction and civilizing and has fought brilliantly successful technical wars against what was always portrayed as a dumb, essentially repellent population of uncivilized Arab natives.”

This was a harsh and distorted view of the Zionist movement. Still, Said was somewhat constrained relative to later declarations by Palestinian leaders comparing the Nakba to the Holocaust. What the early Nakba studies did have in common was an indictment of the Jews for dispossessing the Palestinians, while finding no fault at all on the Palestinian side. Several Israeli revisionist historians and “post-Zionist” pundits also endorsed aspects of the Nakba narrative.

Yet that narrative was rebutted by other historians of the Israel–Palestinian conflict. That is how scholarly controversies usually play out in open societies. In the United States, for example, fierce debates have periodically erupted over various revisionist interpretations of American history, including the work of Charles Beard in the 1930s and of the radical historian Howard Zinn in the 1980s. More recently, the New York Times’ 1619 Project, a new counternarrative of the American founding, has set off a contentious scholarly dispute.

It is in totalitarian societies that national narratives are enforced by the ruling government. Until the mid-1990s there could not have been an officially endorsed Nakba narrative. In January 1993, Israeli representatives made secret contacts with high-ranking officials of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in Oslo, Norway. The discussions blossomed into what became known as the Oslo process, and by September of that year, it culminated with the famous handshake on the White House lawn between Yasser Arafat and the Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin.

At the time, Arafat was stranded in Tunis, far from Palestine and in a very precarious position. Along with his PLO cadres, he had been expelled from Jordan in 1970, thrown out of Beirut by Israel’s army in 1982 and then again kicked out of Tripoli, Lebanon, by the Syrians. Arafat’s reputation was in tatters among many Arab governments because of his decision to support Sadam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait. That led to a huge cut in the financial support the PLO was receiving from the Gulf states.

In signing the Oslo accords, the Rabin govern-ment threw Arafat a lifeline. Political controversy later erupted in Israel and elsewhere over the wisdom and practicality of the peace agreements. For the purpose of our argument here, however, it’s sufficient to note that the document signed by Rabin and Arafat represented a fairly straightforward political deal, a quid pro quo of sorts.

In part one, Arafat was rescued from his Tunis exile and installed in the West Bank to run a Palestinian government for the first time ever. That was the quid. After an interim period of five years, final-status negotiations were expected to bring the Palestinians an independent state that would in turn recognize Israel. That should have been the quo.

Unfortunately, Arafat pocketed all his benefits (i.e., his triumphant return to Palestine and installation as PA president) up front. When he then reneged on his obligations to Israel, there was no fail-safe mechanism to return to the former status quo. Arafat’s weaponized Nakba narrative became a self-manufactured excuse to break the Oslo agreements without suffering any penalty.
IV.

IN THE SPRING of 1998, as Israel was preparing to celebrate the 50th anniversary of its birth, Arafat and his lieutenants were holding conversations about that upcoming event as well as another pressing issue for the Palestinians. The end of the five-year interim arrangement was approaching, which meant final-status negotiations were supposed to start.

Arafat was under conflicting pressure from two internal factions over the refugee issue. The dominant group was sometimes referred to as the “outsiders,” because they had spent the years since 1948 in exile. Salman Abu Sitta, a member of the Palestine National Council, an original refugee and one of the most active members of the outsider faction, had been urging Arafat never to give up on the right of return. In early 1998, Abu Sitta drafted a public letter to Arafat about the refugee issue that was co-signed by dozens of prominent Palestinians. It said in part:

We absolutely do not accept or recognize any outcome of negotiations which may lead to an agreement that forfeits any part of the right of return of the refugees and the uprooted to their former homes from where they were expelled in 1948, or their due compensation, and we do not accept compensation as a substitute for return.

We absolutely do not accept or recognize any outcome of negotiations which may lead to an agreement that forfeits any part of the right of return of the refugees and the uprooted to their former homes from where they were expelled in 1948, or their due compensation, and we do not accept compensation as a substitute for return.

No other Palestinian leader has acknowledged in such stark terms that when the Nakba narrative includes the right of return, it kills any chance for peace as well as for an independent Palestinian state. The return of the refugees was a deal breaker for Israel, but also for the Clinton administration that helped broker the Oslo accords.

A reluctant Arafat was finally dragooned by President Clinton to go to Camp David in 2000 for the final-status negotiations, but the outcome was a foregone conclusion. The PA president stormed out of the meeting after turning down a generous offer for an independent state. According to Clinton adviser Dennis Ross, in order for the Camp David summit to have succeeded, “the Palestinians had to give up their ‘right of return’ to Israel.”

After Camp David, the Clinton and Bush administrations continued to press Arafat to reconsider his position. Instead, the PA president doubled down. In his 2004 Nakba Day speech, he made his commitment to the refugees’ right of return even more explicit: “The
issue of refugees is the issue of the people and the land, the cause of the homeland and the cause of the entire national destiny, no compromise, no compromise, no settlement, but a sacred right of every Palestinian refugee to return to his homeland, Palestine.”

Another round of peace negotiations took place four years later, this time directly between Israel’s Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and the PA’s President Mahmoud Abbas. They held 35 one-on-one meetings in Jerusalem over a span of seven months. At the last session on September 16, 2008, Olmert offered Abbas an independent Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem. He showed Abbas a proposed map of the borders of the two states that, through territorial swaps, would give the Palestinians almost 100 percent of the territory of the West Bank and Gaza held by the Arabs before the 1967 war. Olmert agreed to allow a token number of refugees to enter Israel on humanitarian grounds but said the agreement had to end all Palestinian claims about the right of return.

Abbas said he would consider the offer and return in a few days with his answer. But he never came back, and the negotiations abruptly ended. In an interview I conducted with Olmert a few years later, the former prime minister made it clear that the sticking point for Abbas was the right of return.

Abbas refused to accept any responsibility for the failure of the peace talks. After Olmert’s proposed map became public, Abbas claimed his hands were tied because the refugees would settle for nothing less than the right to return. How, he asked plaintively, could he turn against his own people? Left unsaid was the fact that Abbas (like Arafat before him) was responsible for spreading the Nakba lies and hatred into the refugee camps, which then sparked the militancy among the Palestinian masses who, he claimed, prevented an agreement with Olmert.

The refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza have become the permanent places of residence for more than 2 million Palestinians. They are administered by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) established by the UN in 1949 to take care of what was expected to be a temporary humanitarian crisis. Instead, the vast network of UNRWA camps became permanent, a state within a state. After the Oslo accords, Arafat’s PLO was able to take over the camps, which then sparked the militancy among the Palestinian masses who, he claimed, prevented an agreement with Olmert.

Abbas knows that day will never come. Instead, his government’s Nakba narrative guarantees that the Palestinian teenager will remain trapped in her refugee ghetto for decades to come. For the PA president, though, there are many benefits in perpetuating the impossible dream. It provides him with a tale of unprecedented victimhood and a seemingly just cause to champion in the international arena. It also certifies his militancy within Palestinian politics, where militancy is the coin of the realm.

To sum up, Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas revised Constantine Zurayk’s original claim that Zionism committed its crimes against the entire “Arab Nation.” But they also revised Zurayk’s big Nakba lie that “the aim of Zionist imperialism is to annihilate one people so that another may be put in its place.” By continuing to promote this hateful narrative, the Palestinian leaders signaled, and continue to signal, that the struggle is not merely about the consequences of the June 1967 war. It also means that Israel’s struggle for independence and legitimacy is not yet over.

V.

ISRAEL AND ITS SUPPORTERS have not been very effective in countering the Palestinian war of narratives. To some extent this is understandable. The Jewish state still faces existential threats on its borders—rockets from Gaza, long-range missiles and underground attack tunnels from Hezbollah in the north, Iranian drones from the Golan Heights, and, of course, a potential nuclear Iran. Compared with those imminent physical dangers, the Nakba tends to be dismissed by many well-meaning and patriotic Israelis as just words and a story. Yet among all the nations of the world, it is the Jewish people who should have the most acute understanding of the power, for good and evil, of words and stories and, yes, national narratives.

On the other hand, a considerable number of Israelis on the left do take the Nakba seriously and literally, even going so far as to urge their government to accept responsibility for the great injustices committed against the Palestinian people in the 1948 war. Supposedly such an admission of guilt will help bring about reconciliation and peace with the Palestinians. The most influential purveyor of this apology approach to the conflict with the Palestinians is Haaretz, Israel’s
liberal newspaper, which enjoys an international reputation that ignores its tiny readership in Israel.

_Haaretz_ has been publishing a regular series of articles endorsing various aspects of the Nakba narrative. Subscribers to the digital English edition even receive special email alerts whenever another story about the misdeeds of Israel's army in 1948 appears in the paper. And in a parallel to the _New York Times’_ 1619 Project, _Haaretz_ also proposes that the Nakba be taught in Israel's schools as a counterweight to the flawed “patriotic history” in the current school curriculum. _Haaretz’s_ editor in chief, Aluf Benn, made the argument in a lengthy article in January 2021.

Benn begins in a mournful tone as he evokes the symbols and memories of the Nakba that haunt the area where he now works and lives. “I drive through the land and see the traces, the sabra hedges that marked the plot borders in the ruined villages,” Benn writes, “the lone house that remained on the hill near Route 4, the arches decorating the facades on Salameh Street near the _Haaretz_ building. I drive and wonder for how long will Jewish society in Israel ignore these memories.”

Benn then gets to the practical point: “It's time to stop being afraid and to tell the truth. Israel arose on the ruins of the Palestinian community that lived here before 1948. We must talk about the Nakba, not only in Palestinian memorial processions to the villages of their fathers and mothers ... but in high school classes and in university lecture halls.” _Haaretz’s_ editor justifies including the Nakba in the school curriculum with this high-minded principle: “A country must not run from its past, even when it's not pleasant to deal with and raises difficult moral questions.”

There's quite a bit of moral arrogance in that declaration of moral principles. The assumption here is that courageous Israeli journalists like Benn are prepared to face the reality of the Nakba, whereas almost everyone else is afraid of the truth. Actually, what _Haaretz_ wants taught in the schools is not the truth about the 1948 war, but rather elements of the official Palestinian narrative about that event.

The real-world effect of _Haaretz_’s proposed education reform would be demoralizing for the Jewish state, without producing any of the benefits the paper promises. Israeli teenagers would be taught to feel guilty about the allegedly brutal acts committed by their grandparents and great-grandparents during the 1948 War of Independence. At the same, time the Nakba narrative force-fed to teenagers in the Palestinian refugee camps will continue to produce revenge-seeking Jihadis. If that sounds like hyperbole, consider _Haaretz_’s response to a recent Palestinian terrorist attack in the center of Tel Aviv.

On April 7, 2022, a 27-year-old Palestinian named Raad Hazem, born and raised in the Jenin refugee camp, decided this would be the day to put his Nakba education to use. He crossed the border into Israel, picked up some weapons on the way, and managed to get to Tel Aviv’s Dizengoff Street by evening. He sat for a while on a bench outside the Ilka Bar, where young Israelis were enjoying the night out. He then stood up, pulled out two rifles, and started shooting indiscriminately. Three Israeli Jews, including two young men almost exactly Hazem’s age, were killed. Hazem got away but was later hunted down and killed by police in neighboring Jaffa.

_The Truth Behind the Palestinian ‘Catastrophe’: March 2023_
A process of real truth-telling might begin by paying attention to Constantine Zurayk’s pioneering 1948 book, *The Meaning of the Disaster*. It’s the Rosetta stone of Nakba rejectionism and anti-Semitism, yet almost no one who now comments on the Nakba, including *Haaretz* journalists, is aware of what that book says about the Jews. So if *Haaretz* really wants Israelis to recognize the reality of the Nakba, I have a modest proposal for the editors: Publish a Hebrew translation of *Maana al Nakba* (remember, it’s only 70 pages) and distribute it widely, including to the country’s teachers, instructional institutions, and age-appropriate students. Then let’s see what effect this has on the national conversation *Haaretz* wants to have about the history of the conflict with the Palestinians.

The Israeli left’s version of the Nakba is all about one side, the Israeli side. Rarely discussed are the wartime deeds of the two most notorious Palestinian leaders, Haj Amin al-Husseini and Fawzi al-Qawuqji. Both were Nazi collaborators who spent World War II in Germany providing political and military services to the Hitler regime. In their 2010 book, *Nazi Palestine: The Plans for the Extermination of the Jews*, German historians Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Martin Kuppers documented that if the Nazis had prevailed at the battle of El Alamein and conquered Palestine, al-Husseini would have been flown home to supervise a Final Solution for the Jews of Palestine. Al-Husseini was sought as a war criminal in Yugoslavia but escaped to Egypt in 1946 and was then elected chairman of the Arab Higher Committee, the political body representing the Palestinian Arabs during the postwar period. Al-Qawuqji was appointed by the Arab League to the position of field commander of the Arab Liberation Army, the Palestinian irregular military force that fought alongside the five invading Arab armies. In the event of an Arab victory in 1948, the two leaders planned to carry out a real Nakba for the Jews of Israel. Not just a wave of refugees, but mass murder.

In early 1948, there was a foretaste of the massacres and expulsions planned for the Jews. It was perpetrated by the British-officered Jordanian Arab Legion in the area around Jerusalem. The most searing description of that episode of the war was written by the late Israeli novelist, Amos Oz, a leader of the peace movement. In his classic memoir, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Oz reflects on the War of Independence as he experienced it in Jerusalem:

All the Jewish settlements that were captured by the Arabs in the War of Independence, without exception, were razed to the ground, and their Jewish inhabitants were murdered or taken captive or escaped, but the Arab armies did not allow any of the survivors to return after the war. The Arabs implemented a more complete “ethnic cleansing” in the territories they conquered than the Jews did.... The settlements were obliterated, and the synagogues and cemeteries were razed to the ground.

Both were Nazi collaborators who spent World War II in Germany providing political and military services to the Hitler regime. In their 2010 book, *Nazi Palestine: The Plans for the Extermination of the Jews*, German historians Klaus-Michael Mallmann and Martin Kuppers documented that if the Nazis had prevailed at the battle of El Alamein and conquered Palestine, al-Husseini would have been flown home to supervise a Final Solution for the Jews of Palestine.

Al-Husseini was sought as a war criminal in Yugoslavia but escaped to Egypt in 1946 and was then elected chairman of the Arab Higher Committee, the political body representing the Palestinian Arabs during the postwar period. Al-Qawuqji was appointed by the Arab League to the position of field commander of the Arab Liberation Army, the Palestinian irregular military force that fought alongside the five invading Arab armies. In the event of an Arab victory in 1948, the two leaders planned to carry out a real Nakba for the Jews of Israel. Not just a wave of refugees, but mass murder.

In early 1948, there was a foretaste of the massacres and expulsions planned for the Jews. It was perpetrated by the British-officered Jordanian Arab Legion in the area around Jerusalem. The most searing description of that episode of the war was written by the late Israeli novelist, Amos Oz, a leader of the peace movement. In his classic memoir, *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, Oz reflects on the War of Independence as he experienced it in Jerusalem:

Oz also cites statements made by two Arab leaders promising a murderous ending for the Jewish state. Azzam Pasha, the secretary general of the Arab League, vowed in early 1948 that “this war will be a war of extermination and a momentous massacre which will be spoken of like the Mongol massacres and the Crusades.” And, according to Oz, “the Iraqi Prime Minister, Muzahim al-Bajaji, called on the Jews ‘to pack their bags and leave while there was still time,’ because the Arabs had vowed that after their victory, they would only spare the lives of those few Jews who had lived in Palestine before 1917.”

As Israel’s 75th anniversary and the 25th Nakba Day approach, we ought to be highlighting Amos Oz’s words as well as all the documentary evidence revealing the murderous intentions in 1948 of the Arab invaders and their Palestinian allies. Israelis should never apologize for winning the War of Independence and avoiding another Holocaust. While continuing to extend a hand of peace to the Palestinians, we must honor those young men and women who served in that unavoidable war and made the miracle of modern Israel possible.
We have tee shirts.
We have tote bags. We have sweatshirts.

---

AT LAST!

THE

Commentary
Magazine

STORE

GO TO MERCH.COMMENTARY.ORG

Great gifts for the Commentary reader
or Commentary podcast listener
in your life.
The Iraq War, 20 Years Later

It wasn’t the disaster everyone now says it was

By Eli Lake

TEN YEARS AGO, President George W. Bush announced to the world the beginning of a war to “disarm Iraq, to free its people, and to defend the world from grave danger.” With these brief remarks, Bush inalterably changed the trajectory of his presidency and U.S. foreign policy in the 21st century. On March 19, 2003, the vast majority of Americans supported the war to end Saddam Hussein’s regime. That support wouldn’t last.

Today, it is a matter of banal consensus that the war for Iraq was a blunder. This narrative is bolstered by the fact that the war and reconstruction were riddled with mistakes: Shortly after a victory against an impoverished and disloyal Iraqi army, everything began to unravel. The weapons of mass destruction that Colin Powell told the United Nations Security Council Saddam had concealed were never found. The U.S. military was unprepared to administer a country of what was then 30 million people. L. Paul Bremer, the second American proconsul, disbanded the Iraqi army, which provided a steady stream of armed young men for an insurgency led by the remnants of the Baath Party and al-Qaeda. A war that Bush and his cabinet had promised would cost less than $200 billion has now, 20 years later, cost more than $2 trillion. And there were abuses. The most notorious of these scandals was the torture and humiliation of Iraqis at Abu Ghraib prison. The U.S. Army and the CIA partnered with thugs after the fall of Saddam’s regime. Even John McCain, for years the most unflinching advocate for Iraq’s liberation, came to view the war as an error. In his final memoir, published in 2018, the year he died, McCain wrote, “The war, with its cost in lives and treasure and security, can’t be judged as anything other than a mistake, a very serious one, and I have to accept my share of the blame for it.”

With all due respect to the late Senator McCain, his confession was premature, at least in one key respect. Despite massive corruption and the reverberations of a political crisis that began in 2019 with widespread protest, Iraq is better off today than it was 20 years ago.

Eli Lake, a contributing editor to Commentary, is the host of the Reeducation podcast and a columnist for the New York Sun.
While corruption is the most significant challenge to Iraq today, that in and of itself is a testament to the progress the country has made in the past 20 years.

In 2003, the World Bank estimated that Iraq's GDP was a paltry $21.9 billion. In 2021, Iraq's GDP was nearly $208 billion. During Saddam's reign, only a small number of Iraqis had cellphone subscriptions. As of 2021, 86 percent of the country had a wireless telecom plan. Several measures of quality of life, from literacy rates to life expectancy, have gone up. Just one example: Before the advent of Covid, life expectancy in Iraq had risen to 72 years. In 2001, it was 67.

Despite two Sunni Jihadist insurgencies, not to mention reprisal campaigns from Iran's Shia majority and Iran's proxies and agents, Iraq has held six consecutive parliamentary elections since 2005. Its representatives have drafted and its people have ratified a constitution. And while Iraq's political system is blemished by corruption and sectarian demagoguery, the country's elections are competitive. The outcome is not known in advance, as were the pageants staged by Saddam Hussein during his reign.

Iraq's Kurdish provinces have enjoyed a level of autonomy since the fall of Saddam, even though the ruling Talabani and Barzani families remain enriched in Kurdish areas through graft. The Kurds make up as much as 20 percent of Iraq's population of 42 million. And the creation and continued existence of a Kurdish provincial government—which began after the first Gulf War in 1991—has given Iraqi Kurds almost unprecedented security. The Baathist regime's forces massacred Kurdish civilians at the ends of both the Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s and the first Gulf War in 1991. In 1988, Iraqi forces gassed Kurdish civilians at Halabja, the last time a state used chemical weapons in the 20th century.

Even more startling, despite all signs that Iraq would become a vassal of Iran after Barack Obama withdrew U.S. forces at the end of 2011, there remain significant limits to Iran's influence in Baghdad. In 2019, a protest movement emerged in part targeted Iranian meddling in the country. The struggle of Iraqis against Iran's designs for their country was bolstered in the first days of 2020 by an unlikely figure, Donald Trump. When he ordered the drone strike that killed Qasem Soleimani, the leader of Iran's Quds force (as well as the head of Iraq's popular mobilization forces, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis), Iran's campaign to control Iraq was dealt a serious blow.

Iraq's prime minister, Mohammed al-Sudani (chosen by Iraq's elected parliament in October 2022), has so far shown he is not Iran's cat's-paw, even though he was selected by a Shia political coalition with historic ties to Iran. In January, al-Sudani told the Wall Street Journal that he did not support a policy to force out the 2,000 U.S. soldiers currently stationed in Baghdad and the Kurdish provinces. And in July, before al-Sudani's ascendance, Iraq signed a deal with Saudi Arabia to connect to its electricity grid, a move that would make the country less dependent on Iran for its energy.

All of these hopeful signs do not mask the most significant threat to the Iraqi state today: corruption. At the end of 2022, al-Sudani held a press conference flanked by stacks of Iraqi dinars worth $250 million that had been recovered from former high government officials who had looted $2.5 billion in tax revenues from the state-owned Rafidain Bank. The tragedy here is that the $2.5 billion swindle was a drop in the bucket compared with the amount of money stolen from the Iraqi treasury and U.S. financial assistance since 2003. Some estimates put that figure north of $200 billion.

This endemic corruption is one of the negative legacies of the U.S. intervention. The federal reserve, since 2003, has exported between $1 billion and $2 billion a month to Iraq to help pay salaries for government employees and provide capital for foreign trade agreements. These cash shipments ended up fueling a system that has created a class of billionaires who secure loans for imports that are never shipped and for businesses that exist only on paper.

But while corruption is the most significant challenge to Iraq today, that in and of itself is a testament to the progress the country has made in the past 20 years. Consider that the Iraqi state has survived two terror wars since the fall of Saddam Hussein. When I was last in the country, in 2015, at the height of its second terror war, I went on the front lines with an Iraqi military unit that was taking orders from the leader of the Badr Brigade, a Shiite militia with deep ties to Iran. There I encountered a grocer named Assam al-Hashem who had fought for Saddam's army in the 1980s, manning an anti-aircraft gun. Al-Hashem said he was grateful to fight alongside a militia that was trained and equipped by Iran because there was no alternative. "What choice do we have?" he asked.
To understand his perspective, one must recognize the barbarity and cruelty of the Islamic State and its earlier incarnation, al-Qaeda in Iraq. One gruesome story from 2006 was that a local sheik in Anbar who had refused to give his obeisance to a local jihadist found at his home a cooler with the severed heads of his children. The Islamic State was known for rounding up the women of a town it had conquered and "marrying" them off to the victorious warriors. When facing such a foe, one will accept aid from anyone willing to provide it.

The bargain that Iraq's leaders made in 2014 and 2015 with Iranian-backed militias to save their state from a new caliphate is the antecedent to the corruption problems and the militias that plague Iraq today. But as daunting as those challenges are, they are better problems than the ones faced by Iraq from the jihadist insurgencies before.

All of this gets back to Bush's original reasons for starting the war. Let's start with Bush's most obvious error. He promised to disarm a country that was not stockpiling the chemical and biological weapons that U.S. intelligence agencies, as well as almost every other foreign spy service, believed Saddam was hiding. In the past 20 years, barrels of ink and thousands of acres of forest land have been spilled and milled to forward a tendentious theory that the Bush administration lied in the run-up to the war when it claimed to know that Saddam had stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction. No subsequent reports from either Congress or various bipartisan commissions have confirmed the deception, though it is true that some dissenting analyses on this question were not included with the more alarmist public estimates of Iraq's WMDs. That said, it was not as if Iraq was innocent and simply the victim of Western plotting. Saddam never complied with the 17th UN Security Council resolution that required him to demonstrate that he had disarmed. Rather, his military shot at surveillance planes. He barred scientists from speaking with UN inspectors. The 2004 report from CIA weapons inspector Charles Duelfer concluded that "Saddam wanted to recreate Iraq's WMD capability—which was essentially destroyed in 1991—after sanctions were removed and Iraq's economy stabilized." It also said Saddam had had an interest in convincing his neighbors and his own people that he possessed the apocalyptic weapons he had in his possession before his 1991 invasion of Kuwait.

Did the war "free Iraqis"? If you compare their lives with those of Belgians or Americans today, then Iraqis are not free. But that is primarily because of the presence of sectarian militias and the reality of staggering corruption. Indeed, these are the two main reasons Freedom House ranks Iraq as "unfree," despite its contested successive elections. But are Iraqis freer in 2023 than they were under Saddam Hussein's tyranny? Without question, they are. Saddam created a Stalinist nightmare in Iraq, empowering the secret police to disappear citizens. Neighbors spied on neighbors. Bureaucrats lived in constant fear. When Saddam's son Uday was placed in charge of Iraq's Olympic committee, he would often torture at a private prison in the committee's offices the athletes who were bested in international competition.

Finally, is the world safer now that Saddam no longer is in charge of Iraq? If you asked that question in 2006, before Bush chose General David Petraeus to oversee a new counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq, the answer would have been no. In 2006, al-Qaeda in Iraq and Iranian-supported death squads were engaged in a competitive ethnic cleansing that risked spilling over into a regional war. But by the beginning of Barack Obama's presidency, al-Qaeda's insurgency was largely defeated and Iraq was on a better trajectory. After 2011, when Obama withdrew U.S. forces from Iraq, its Shia prime minister, Nouri al-Malaki, persecuted the Anbari tribes that sided with America against al-Qaeda. This created another opening for al-Qaeda's successor, the Islamic State. After the Islamic State took over Mosul and was threatening Baghdad in 2014, there would have been merit in denying that the world had been made safer by the Iraq war. But the Islamic State's caliphate was defeated as well.

In 2023, Iraq still has much work to do. And yet its current condition represents a historic achievement that has not been recognized. Iraq has continued to have successive elections, its economy has grown, and Iraqis have managed to save their country twice from fanatic terror armies seeking to rebuild a lost caliphate. To evaluate the war that rid Iraq of a sadistic crime family, one must imagine what Iraq would have resembled had Saddam or his sons remained in power. In that light, the plagues of corruption, ethnic militias, and Iranian influence look like a bargain. 

Commentary
When Netanyahu Spoke to Congress

A controversy revisited

By Rick Richman

Only two foreign leaders have addressed Congress three times: British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (in 1941, 1943, and 1952) and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in 1996, 2011, and 2015. This month marks the eighth anniversary of what was, by far, the most controversial of those speeches.

On March 3, 2015, speaking at the invitation of the speaker of the House over the opposition of the president, Netanyahu told Congress that the Obama administration’s emerging “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action” (the “JCPOA” or “Iran Deal”) was a “very bad deal.”

In his recent memoir, Bibi: My Story, Netanyahu writes that accepting the invitation required a “monumental decision”—whether to challenge a U.S. president, before the nation’s assembled representatives, on the president’s central foreign-policy goal, risking Israel’s relationship with its essential ally. Many people advised him not to do it, among them a senior cabinet minister, a previous Israeli U.S. ambassador, various others in the Israeli government, some prominent pro-Israel American friends, and most of his own staff.

But by 2015, blocking Iran’s nuclear program had been Netanyahu’s central goal for more than a decade. In 2006, while out of office, Netanyahu addressed 3,000 people at the United Jewish Communities of North America and argued that history was repeating itself: “It is 1938; Iran is Germany; and it is racing to acquire nuclear weapons.” He quoted Churchill’s 1935 statement that there was “nothing new in the story” of Britain’s passivity regarding German rearmament. It reflected, Churchill said, “the confirmed unteachability of mankind.”

Rick Richman is a resident scholar at American Jewish University. This essay is adapted from his new book, And None Shall Make Them Afraid: Eight Stories of the Modern State of Israel, published February 28 by Encounter Books.
Want of foresight, the unwillingness to act when action will be simple and effective, the lack of clear thinking, the confusion of counsel until the emergency comes, until self-preservation strikes its jarring gong—these are the features which constitute the endless repetition of history.

Netanyahu considered the Iranian nuclear challenge a “hinge of history.” In 2009, after becoming prime minister again, he made Iran the focus of his first UN address, saying, “I speak here today in the hope that Churchill’s assessment of the ‘unteachability of mankind’ is for once proven wrong.”

Four years later, as the U.S. and Iran adopted an initial “Joint Plan of Action” (JPOA) to negotiate a “comprehensive” (but time-limited) agreement, which would lift sanctions and ratify an Iranian nuclear program with only temporary restrictions, Netanyahu believed that Churchill’s old story was happening again.

The JPOA and JCPOA resulted in significant part from the fear that, as Iran’s nuclear program proceeded during the first four years of the Obama administration and Iran refused to negotiate, Israel was preparing to attack. There was ample precedent for such a strike: Israel had destroyed Iraq’s nuclear reactor in 1981, and it had destroyed Syria’s in 2007.

At the end of 2006, Joshua Muravchik, a respected foreign-policy analyst, had published an op-ed in the Los Angeles Times titled “Bomb Iran.” In 2007, John Bolton, who had been under secretary of state for arms control and international security, said he saw no alternative to a preemptive attack; the same year, Senator John McCain said that the only thing worse than bombing Iran was Iran with a bomb. In 2008, Norman Podhoretz, in an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal, advocated a military strike; and by 2008 King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia had repeatedly urged the U.S. to “cut off the head of the snake.”

Former prime minister Ehud Barak, serving as
Netanyahu’s defense minister, warned in 2011 that Israel might have to strike soon. In January 2012, Ronen Bergman, the well-informed military reporter for one of Israel’s largest newspapers, predicted in the New York Times that Israel would strike later that year.

In his memoir, Netanyahu writes that “Obama waged a relentless campaign against the possibility of an independent Israeli attack.” Netanyahu relays that Obama “assured me he was building a military capacity and that it should be given a chance to work.” Former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta later said that one of his most important jobs in 2011–13 had been keeping Israel from attacking. He did so in significant part by assuring Netanyahu and Barak that President Obama was serious about taking military action, if it proved necessary. Netanyahu repeatedly postponed a plan to strike, unable to secure approval of his security cabinet given both the numerous risks and the American assurances.

In 2012, the U.S. began secret negotiations with Iran without informing Israel. When Israel discovered them, the Obama administration promised that: (i) any sanctions relief would be phased in; (ii) sanctions would be dismantled only when Iran’s nuclear program was dismantled; (iii) there would be “anytime, anywhere” inspections; and (iv) Iran would have to answer the long-standing questions of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) about its nuclear program.

In early 2013, the United States and its negotiating partners (Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and China) offered Iran a deal—one that incorporated none of the assurances to Israel. In exchange for a partial and temporary suspension of Iran’s nuclear program, with automatic “sunsets” on the restrictions, the nuclear sanctions would end. Iran’s facilities would remain largely intact, with Iranian concessions eminently reversible once the deal ended.

Under the proposed deal, Iran could therefore continue a program that had no plausible purpose other than developing nuclear weapons, and it would be allowed (even during the term of the deal) to develop highly advanced centrifuges and ballistic missiles.

The financial benefits for Iran were extraordinary. It would immediately receive about $150 billion—which represented for Iran what $8 trillion would represent for the American economy. The money would finance not only Iran’s continuing nuclear program, but its proxy armies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Gaza.

Finally, even if Iran strictly observed the deal, it would end up with a completely legal, industrial-sized nuclear-enrichment program, internationally approved, capable of producing numerous nuclear weapons, with a breakout time that, Obama publicly acknowledged, would be “almost down to zero.” Iran would also have missiles that could reach not only Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other Middle Eastern countries, but Europe as well—and perhaps beyond.

On October 28, 2014, as the parties approached a final deal, the editor of the Atlantic, Jeffrey Goldberg, reported on his interview with “a senior Obama administration official,” who called Netanyahu a “chickenshit.” Another “senior official,” Goldberg reported, agreed with that characterization. The official attributed Netanyahu’s failure to strike to “a combination of our pressure and his own unwillingness to do anything dramatic.” And “now,” the official gloated, “it’s too late.”

Israel’s prior U.S. ambassador, Michael Oren, noted caustically in 2015 that the “prime minister whom Obama once thanked for granting him time and space to negotiate with Tehran” was “now branded ‘chickenshit’ for showing restraint.” Oren recounted that he “spent the next day on Israeli television trying to translate chickenshit into Hebrew” and trying to “explain how America’s president could show more respect to Putin and Khamenei than he did to Netanyahu.”

In February 2015, when Netanyahu received the invitation to address Congress, Israel’s ambassador to the United States, Ron Dermer, told him that no Israeli prime minister—given the opportunity to speak on such an issue—could remain silent.

“If you don’t do the speech,” Dermer said to him, “what’s the point of [you sitting in the prime minister’s chair]?” Dermer’s rhetorical question sealed Netanyahu’s decision to proceed. In the weeks before the speech, the two met every morning, working for hours on drafts. “Every syllable,” Netanyahu writes in his memoir, was “planned.”

Fifty-eight Democrats boycotted Netanyahu’s speech, but he was escorted into the chamber by a bipartisan group of lawmakers and received a warm reception, interrupted by applause and ovations 26 times. The Democratic leader, Nancy Pelosi, attended...
the speech but made her displeasure known with repeated facial expressions and headshakes. She issued a statement calling it an “insult to the intelligence of the United States.”

Netanyahu told Congress that the Iranian regime was “not merely a Jewish problem, any more than the Nazi regime was merely a Jewish problem.” He cited two fundamental problems with the prospective deal: “one, leaving Iran with a vast nuclear program; and two, lifting the restrictions on that program in about a decade.” The deal thus would not “block Iran’s path to the bomb; it paves Iran’s path to the bomb.”

In a key portion of the speech, Netanyahu noted that Iran had already conquered four countries, and that the anticipated Iranian moderation had not materialized: “In the Middle East, Iran now dominates four Arab capitals, Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and Sana. . . . Two years ago, we were told to give [Iranian] President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif a chance to bring change and moderation to Iran. Some change! Some moderation!”

This was an all-but-direct reference to Winston Churchill’s December 1941 “Some Chicken” speech to Canada’s parliament, in which the British prime minister famously told a story about the French reaction to his warning in 1940 that Britain would fight on alone if France sought a concord with Nazi Germany: “Their generals told their Prime Minister, and his divided Cabinet, ‘In three weeks England will have her neck wrung like a chicken.’ Some chicken! Some neck!”

Netanyahu ended by telling Congress that “the days when the Jewish people remained passive in the face of genocidal enemies, those days are over.”

We restored our sovereignty in our ancient home. And the soldiers who defend our home have boundless courage. For the first time in 100 generations, we, the Jewish people, can defend ourselves. This is why, as a prime minister of Israel, I can promise you one more thing: Even if Israel has to stand alone, Israel will stand.

Netanyahu had worked a stunning twist on the ad hominem “chickenshit” attack by the Obama administration’s “senior officials” by invoking a previous time when a pusillanimous and insulting set of government officials had likened stalwart opposition to irredentist tyranny to helpless poultry. Netanyahu was asking Congress, in so many (Churchillian) words, to resist the Obama administration’s push for a separate peace with Iran—one opposed by the countries in the region who would be directly affected by it: not only Israel but America’s Arab allies as well.

There was another historical echo in Netanyahu’s address, reflected not in its words but in its setting. A few days before the speech, Dermer met with

---

Netanyahu noted in his speech that Iran had already conquered four countries, and that the anticipated Iranian moderation had not materialized.

---

Commentary

Richman March 2.09F.indd 33 2/13/23 11:06 AM
When Netanyahu Spoke to Congress: March 2023

switched their positions; only 42 eventually supported the Iran Deal; and the Arab states took notice—increasing their ties with Israel after seeing it stand up for itself as America was preparing to stand down. Dermer said that Netanyahu's speech “gave [the Arabs] a great deal of confidence that Israel was willing to be a reliable actor, independent of what U.S. policy would be in the region.” He went on: “And I can tell you that one of the leaders who made peace [in the 2020 Abraham Accords] contacted the prime minister right after that speech.” Dermer said of the speech that it “accelerated the ties that were happening beneath the surface between Israel and the Arab states.... I think it changed the trajectory.”

PRESIDENT OBAMA made the Iran Deal an “executive agreement,” avoiding the constitutional requirement of a two-thirds Senate vote for a treaty but enabling President Trump to withdraw from it at will. Trump did so after Israel, in a daring operation, extracted a massive tranche of Iranian nuclear files—55,000 pages of documents and 183 CDs hidden in a dilapidated warehouse in Tehran—and provided them to the United States. The files demonstrated that Iran had a long-standing plan to develop nuclear weapons even while denying it and had hidden nuclear facilities from IAEA inspections.

As a candidate, Joe Biden pledged to reenter the Iran Deal, as a “platform” to negotiate a “longer and stronger agreement”—an implicit admission that the JCPOA was too short and too weak. As a candidate, Joe Biden pledged to negotiate a ‘longer and stronger agreement’—an implicit admission that the JCPOA was too short and too weak.

so), and with a widespread citizen revolt in Iran and an expanding Iranian military alliance with Russia, the U.S. finally called a halt. The U.S. chief negotiator said, “We can’t sort of keep going back and then being played.”

President Biden said the negotiations were “dead,” but that he could not announce the fact—perhaps because the administration still hoped to conclude a deal eventually, or perhaps because it would be evident after such an announcement that it had no Plan B.

In December 2022, the nonprofit, nonpartisan Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) issued an authoritative analysis, titled “Iran Building Nuclear Weapons.” It concluded that “a revived [JCPOA] deal” would “at first complicate Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons...but by allowing a buildup to a large enrichment capacity and ultimately no caps on enrichment level, Iran would again be able to quickly breakout and build nuclear weapons.” It effectively confirmed what Netanyahu had told Congress in 2015 was the essence of the impending JCPOA.

As he prepared to become prime minister again, Netanyahu was asked by Jewish Insider in December 2022 what he would convey to Congress if he could give a fourth address. He answered that his message would be “peace through strength, prosperity through free markets, and the alliance of the like-minded states to assure our place and our permanence, to the extent anybody could do that, in history. That’s really something that unites us across nations, across oceans, and across time.”

As a candidate, Joe Biden pledged to negotiate a ‘longer and stronger agreement’—an implicit admission that the JCPOA was too short and too weak.

When Netanyahu Spoke to Congress: March 2023
Paul Johnson, 1928–2023
How a serious man changed the world
By Andrew Roberts

When Paul Johnson was a schoolboy, he met Winston Churchill on the steps of the Clifton Arms public house in Lytham in Lancashire. The prime minister gave him one of the long matches that he used to light his cigars, emboldening young Paul to ask, “Mr. Churchill, sir, to what do you attribute your success in life?” The reply was instantaneous: “Conservation of energy. Never stand up when you can sit down. And never sit down when you can lie down.”

Paul Johnson never seemed to conserve his energy, however. His prodigious output was unmatched by any other British writer of his generation. He published more than 50 books, became editor of the New Statesman magazine at the age of only 36 in 1965, debated regularly on Britain’s TV and radio shows, carved a reputation for himself as the best-known British historian in America—and, at a crucial moment in the history of his country, ignored the pleas of lifelong friends on the left and embraced the Thatcher revolution, which he recognized as the only way to save Britain from slipping down into the third tier of the world’s nations. He also wrote an outstanding history of the Jews, fired as he was by a lifelong loathing of anti-Semitism and all its metastasizing forms.

In the mid-1970s, Johnson bravely set his face against the trade-union militancy and Marxist activism that was wrecking the United Kingdom’s economy and democracy, and he denounced it in language of remarkable range and eloquence. “In the 1970s Britain was on its knees,” he later explained of this period in
Although Paul never joined the Conservative Party, he advised Margaret Thatcher during her premiership and was occasionally called upon to contribute to her speeches.

his life, “The Left had no answers. I became disgusted by the over-powerful trade unions which were destroying Britain.” Blessed with the remarkable capacity to type 1,000 words of searing, well-argued, factually supported polemic in only 15 minutes, Paul was a commanding presence in British journalism for half a century. He died at 94 on January 12, 2023.

Without his apostasy against the left in the period after Margaret Thatcher became leader of the Conservative Party in 1975, it would have been possible for the Labour Party to paint her as an extremist reactionary bent on ending trade-union rights. Yet along with the Labour MP Woodrow Wyatt, the newspaper columnist Bernard Levin, and the novelist Kingsley Amis—all of whom had been Labour supporters since 1945—Paul was able to persuade many lifelong Labour voters that the party, which by this point had come to support unilateral nuclear disarmament, was no longer the same organization that it had been under Clement Attlee and his immediate successors following the Second World War, and that Thatcher could be trusted to rein in anti-democratic trade-union ultra-left militancy.

The result was to be 11 and a half years of Margaret Thatcher’s premiership. Although Paul never joined the Conservative Party, he advised her and was occasionally called upon to contribute to her speeches. Paul was offered a peerage by Thatcher, and later also by Tony Blair, but he honorably refused on both occasions because he did not believe that journalists should accept honours from politicians. Instead of retiring to the cozy anonymity of the House of Lords backbenches, he continued in the Daily Mail and many other newspapers to issue broadsides against the ills of modern society. His firm Catholic faith, socially conservative beliefs, contempt for Marxism and anti-Semitism, patriotic support for Britain’s active role in the world, love of Ronald Reagan’s vision of America, and superb sense of humor and delight in mischief-making meant that he became one of the most readable British journalists of the 20th century.

IT WAS PROBABLY Paul’s upbringing in the 1930s in the Potteries region of Staffordshire in the West Midlands, an area known for its no-nonsense plain speaking, that gave him the brutal honesty he unleashed in his 1988 book Intellectuals, one of his finest, in which he flays a series of famous thinkers for their abominable personal hypocrisy. “Didn’t think much of his opinions,” he once said of Jean-Paul Sartre, “and he was a very ugly little man.” Similarly, it might well have been the influence of Paul’s father, who was the headmaster of the Burslem School of Art, that encouraged Paul in his profound knowledge and love of traditional representation and left him despising much of the modernist art school, as expressed in his bestselling, countercultural work of 2003, Art: A New History. (Paul himself painted watercolors, giving them to friends.)

Nor did Paul reserve his commentary solely to the written word and his regular TV and radio appearances. When the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm was invited to say a few words at a London Library party in the early 1990s, Paul kept up a hilarious, low-level barracking of the Stalin apologist that had those around him laughing uncontrollably. His use of ridicule to puncture the pomposity and illuminate the fatuous inconsistency of leftist intellectuals was a constant joy to his many friends.

Paul was always helpful to young journalists and would-be authors, giving them extensive free interviews, often in his drawing room in his well-appointed house in Bayswater. In almost all cases they treated him with the respect his age and eminence warranted. On one occasion, however, an interviewer arrived to attack him with rude questions criticizing Paul’s admiration for Ronald Reagan. After answering a few of them perfectly politely, Paul got irritated and bored by the left-wing termagant. So he simply stood up and, without a word of explanation, went upstairs for a nap. The journalist, nonplussed and with his tape recorder still running, called upstairs several times and waited until it became clear that Paul was not returning, and then let himself out. It might have been uncharacteristically discourteous of Paul, but who among us hasn’t wanted to do the same thing?

Paul’s charming memoir, The Vanished Landscape (2003), was a funny and evocative paean to his early years, from his birth in 1928 to the outbreak of World War II in September 1939. It provides several glimpses into how and why he turned into the Promethean figure he became. His remarkable memory

for facts derived from his mother, Anne, who, he writes, "came from a time when memory training was instilled and vast quantities of knowledge were stored in the spacious chambers of the mind." Anne Johnson could recite all the rivers and bays of Europe, the kings and queens of England with reigning dates, the prime ministers from Sir Robert Walpole, Britain's dominions and colonies in order of acquisition, the decisive battles of world history, and so on. She had many thousands of lines of poetry by heart, including Milton, Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, Southey, and Browning. When in later life Paul wrote his thousand-word pieces for the *Daily Mail* and other publications, he rarely had to consult the reference books in his library, thanks to his mother's training. "She was an enchantress," he wrote, "and the countless hours I spent listening to her are rich treasures I shall carry with me to my grave."

Paul's Roman Catholicism derived from Father Ryan, to whom he had to make confession from the age of six. "I doubt if he heard a word of my mumble," Paul wrote of one of these early encounters, "but he pronounced absolution and said, 'Tell the next [child] to make it snappy.'" Later on that day, Paul's schoolmate Rena Milton asked him how many sins he had confessed, and when he replied three, "she positively smirked, and putting her hand on her hip and twirling, said, 'I had nine!'"

Paul was educated at the Jesuit public school Stonyhurst from 13; his profound Catholicism was an integral part of his personality. His powerfully expressed belief that homosexuality was sinful produced a good deal of outraged criticism from his detractors, but although he had several gay friends, it was not a stance from which he ever resiled. From Stonyhurst, Paul won an exhibition to Magdalen College, Oxford, where from 1946 to 1949 he read modern history.

Paul considered himself a historian as much as journalist. His greatest bestseller, *A History of the Modern World*—published in the United States as *Modern Times* in 1983—provides a master class in how history ought to be written, blending narrative with insightful commentary. The extraordinary commercial successes of Paul's books—it was said that his *History of the Jews* was given as a present at half the bar mitzvahs in America—meant that Paul never accepted advances from publishers, so he started receiving royalties from the moment the first copy of each book was sold. It is an almost unheard-of practice, but it gave him the satisfaction of knowing that he never needed to earn back advances, which of course made him popular with publishers, as did his practice of always indexing his books himself. His close and long friendship with the maestro publisher George Weidenfeld, who published much of Paul's vast output, gave both men enormous pleasure.

Paul had an innate gift for friendship. Among his other close friends was Norman Podhoretz, the former editor of *Commentary* and father of its present editor. Paul and Norman were contemporaries; both edited magazines of the left, then moved to the right, enduring ferocious criticism in the process. Among his younger American friends, the historian Amity Shlaes got to know him well in later years, around the time he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President George W. Bush in December 2006. "Our country honors Paul Johnson," Bush said at the investiture ceremony, "and proudly calls him a friend." Richard Nixon became a fan after leaving office. He would not have been a fan when in office, however, as Johnson attended anti-Vietnam War demonstrations outside the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square in London.

In 1957 Paul married Marigold Hunt, the daughter of Dr. Thomas Hunt, physician to Prime Ministers Churchill, Attlee, and Anthony Eden. She is a sparky, delightful, and engaged woman whom Paul adored for the next two-thirds of a century. Her attractive personality deflected some of the more bitter criticism that would otherwise have been directed at her occasionally rebarbative husband. "Paul is offense," their son Daniel has said, "and Marigold is defense."

Marigold was educated at Oxford and later campaigned against poverty with prison reformer Lord Longford, the father of her great friend, the historian Antonia Fraser. In 1974, she stood as a Labour candidate in the safe Tory seat of Beaconsfield and never joined her husband in his admiration of Margaret Thatcher's politics. On meeting Thatcher at a reception once, Marigold tried to make small talk, later recalling, "I was standing with a glass of Champagne and I said nervously: 'Isn't it lovely to be here, a real treat.' And Margaret looked at me with such contempt and said, 'I don't get up in the morning and think..."
Paul knew he was making a difference from his huge book sales, bursting mailbags, praise from friends, and—equally enjoyably—the howls of fury from his enemies.

Of course the profound effect that Paul had on British politics and society made him widely loathed on the left after his mid-1970s apostasy, especially once he became one of the leading standard-bearers for the causes of Thatcherism, Zionism, and pro-Americanism. Far from disconcerting him, however, the abuse he received only ever confirmed him in his certainty that he was on the correct side. He had firm convictions and great moral courage, as well as a superb sense of fun. I knew him well for 30 years, and almost all my many memories of him involve laughter.

All writers worry occasionally that they are preaching into a void, that their work has little or no effect. Paul Johnson knew that he was making a difference. He knew it from his huge book sales, bursting mailbags, praise from friends, and—equally enjoyably—the howls of fury from his enemies. The phrase “Great Man” is bandied about far too promiscuously in an age when any sports personality, celebrity, or tycoon seems awarded the distinction by an undiscriminating media. Paul Johnson, however, was indeed a Great Man. 

PAUL JOHNSON was a rain-making journalist; what he wrote changed people’s minds and ultimately their votes, too. It is unlikely that the British people would have voted to reclaim their sovereign independence from the European Union in the Brexit referendum if it had not been for the decades-long work that public commentators—Paul at the forefront among them—had done pointing out the constitutional implications of Britain’s membership. His eloquence and vigor changed Britain, and probably far more than if he had followed his youthful idea of entering politics.

Of course the profound effect that Paul had on British politics and society made him widely loathed on the left after his mid-1970s apostasy, especially once he became one of the leading standard-bearers for the causes of Thatcherism, Zionism, and pro-Americanism. Far from disconcerting him, however, the abuse he received only ever confirmed him in his certainty that he was on the correct side. He had firm convictions and great moral courage, as well as a superb sense of fun. I knew him well for 30 years, and almost all my many memories of him involve laughter.

All writers worry occasionally that they are preaching into a void, that their work has little or no effect. Paul Johnson knew that he was making a difference. He knew it from his huge book sales, bursting mailbags, praise from friends, and—equally enjoyably—the howls of fury from his enemies. The phrase “Great Man” is bandied about far too promiscuously in an age when any sports personality, celebrity, or tycoon seems awarded the distinction by an undiscriminating media. Paul Johnson, however, was indeed a Great Man. 

PAUL JOHNSON was a rain-making journalist; what he wrote changed people’s minds and ultimately their votes, too. It is unlikely that the British people would have voted to reclaim their sovereign independence from the European Union in the Brexit referendum if it had not been for the decades-long work that public commentators—Paul at the forefront among them—had done pointing out the constitutional implications of Britain’s membership. His eloquence and vigor changed Britain, and probably far more than if he had followed his youthful idea of entering politics.
God, Literature, and Anton Chekhov

Can writing without judgment be great?

By Joseph Epstein

READING ALONG in Old Truths and New Clichés, a recently published collection of the essays and lectures of Isaac Bashevis Singer, I came across Singer’s extraordinary notion that talented people “cannot be atheists for the simple reason that by their very nature they must wrangle with the higher powers. They may revile God, but they cannot deny God.” Elsewhere in the book, Singer notes that “God is a writer and we are both the characters and the readers,” and that “the fear of death is nothing but the fear of having to close God’s book.” He adds that, if God is an artist, “he is not a modernist.”

Joseph Epstein has written for Commentary for 60 years.

The division between artists who believe in God and those who do not suggests another of those binary divisions among artists, writers in particular, such as those between Palefaces and Redskins, Hedgehogs and Foxes, Realists and Symbolists, and others. As large and risky generalizations go, talented people cannot be atheists resoundingly rings the gong. How high, though, is its truth quotient? Is it true that the greatest artists have never been atheists? How can one determine whether this is so or not? Dead writers, after all, cannot be polled on the question of their beliefs. Nor are living ones likely to be eager to come forth on so personal a question. One can only consult their works, looking for the effect upon them of a belief in God.

One could, of course, puncture Singer’s generalization by pointing out a number of superior writers who declared their atheism or even their strong ag-
nosticism. But those who in recent years have declared themselves atheists—Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens—are none of them imaginative writers. Voltaire, Diderot, and the other writers of the Enlightenment made a direct attempt to shed religion from their writings, but none among them was a superior artist. Was Flaubert an atheist? Was Émile Zola? Was Sinclair Lewis? I cannot say with certainty. All I can say is that God, or the presence of a higher power, does not seem to have played much of a role in their novels.

By “belief in God,” Singer did not necessarily have in mind the God described in the standard religious works of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism. His own belief, as he sets it out in another of his essays, “Why I Write As I Do,” was in a non-revelatory God. Of his religion, he writes: “I had, in a curious way, combined the Ten Commandments, Humean philosophy, and the kabbalistic writing of Rabbi Moshe of Cordova and the Holy Isaac Luria, as well as the occultism of Flammarioin, Sir Oliver Lodge, and Sir William Crooks.” But, then, there was never anything conventional about Isaac Bashevis Singer. When asked if his vegetarianism qualified him as kosher-keeping, he replied that he became vegetarian not for religious reasons or to save himself but to save the chickens. When asked if he believed in free will, he replied, “Of course I believe in free will. What choice have I?”

Singer is joined by Tolstoy in the belief that no true artist can be an atheist. In an essay Tolstoy wrote on what he thought the deficiencies in Shakespeare, he notes that by what he, Tolstoy, termed “the religious essence of art,” he understood “not the direct inculcation of any religious truths in an artistic guise, and not an allegorical demonstration of these truths, but the

Some prominent writers have declared their religion through regular religious practice. Among them have been S.Y. Agnon, T.S. Eliot, Evelyn Waugh, J.F. Powers, Flannery O’Connor, and John Updike. But it is not religious practice that Singer had in mind when he claimed that no true artist can be an atheist. Instead it is the belief, in some writers more evident than in others, of a higher power working decisively in human life. This higher power cannot be denied or defied without cost, though he can be argued with. Why would such a God allow the Holocaust, or the 72-year reign of the Soviet Union, which brought nothing other than envy, starvation, and mass murder to millions of people? If, as Singer affirms, God is a novelist, why would he wish to have written such horror stories?

If God is a novelist, in a sense novelists are mini-gods. They bring characters to life, complicate their lives, drive them to success or failure, sometimes kill them off. One always senses the presence of God in Willa Cather’s writing. So, too, in that of Joseph Conrad, Boris Pasternak, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. This sense is what gives gravity to their works. So, too, does one find it in the novels of Theodore Dreiser and William Faulkner. The same is true of James Joyce. In A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, the character Cranly says of Stephen Dedalus, “It is a curious thing... how your mind is supersaturated with the religion in which you say you disbelieve.”

In many ways a crucial test of Singer’s generalization is Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, perhaps the most famous Russian writer of short stories and without question his nation’s most popular playwright. On more than one occasion, Chekhov declared himself an atheist. He was, however, never a militant one. As the English professor Bill Blaisdell writes in his recent study Chekhov Becomes Chekhov, “he was never smug about his atheism.” Many of his characters find their only hope in religion, and Chekhov never mocks that outlet for hope. It is almost as if he wished he could find that hope, that faith, for himself, but he could not. In a letter to the novelist and playwright I.L. Leontyev-Shcheglov, Chekhov wrote that in his childhood he received what he termed dismal religious instruction and education and added, “I have no religion now.” Later, he would write that “it is necessary to believe in God and if one has no faith, one ought not to replace it with ballyhoo, but seek, seek, seek alone, face to face with one’s conscience.”

To Sergei Diaghilev, Chekhov wrote: “Modern

Many of his characters find their hope in religion, and Chekhov never mocks that outlet for hope. It is as if he wished he could find faith for himself, but couldn’t.

An exhibition of a definite view of life corresponding to the highest religious understanding of a given time, which, serving as the motive for the composition of the drama, penetrates, to the knowledge of the author, through all of his work. So it has always been with true art, and so it is with every true artist in general and especially the dramatist.” George Balanchine put it more simply, saying, “The first subject of art is the love of God.”

God, Literature, and Anton Chekhov : March 2023
culture is the beginning of an effort, in the name of a great future, an effort that will continue for tens of thousands of years, to the end that, if only in the distant future, mankind may know the true, real God, i.e. not conjecturing, not seeking for Him in Dostoyevsky,* but will know Him clearly, know as it knows that two times two is four.” Chekhov, then, was an atheist, but rather a pious one, the best kind of atheist: one without the zeal to argue others out of their religion and one whose first principle was that “people should never be humiliated—that is the main thing.”

Among writers, Chekhov was in that minority of truly good men. “My holy of holies,” he wrote, “is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love, and absolute freedom—freedom from violence and falsehood, no matter how the last two may manifest themselves.” Born in 1860, the third of six children, he lived only 44 years. As a very young man, he became head of his family and through his writing provided the financial upkeep for his brothers, sisters, and parents. His grandfather bought his own way out of serfdom; his father, a cruel and narrow-minded man, failed as shopkeeper. As a physician—not the socially high-level occupation it has been in the West—Chekhov took care of peasants without charge and helped build schools, libraries, and hospitals. He tendered advice to many a would-be writer. For a Russian of his day, he showed scarcely any anti-Semitism and was a Dreyfusard who fell out with his right-wing publisher, Aleksei Suvorin, during Dreyfus’s trial.

In an 1889 letter to his publisher Suvorin, Chekhov wrote of himself: “Go ahead and write about a young man, the son of a serf, an ex-small shopkeeper, a choir boy, a high-school and university student, brought up on respect for rank, kissing priests’ hands, and the worship of others’ ideas, offering thanks for every mouthful of bread, often whipped, going to school without shoes, fighting, torturing animals, fond of dining with rich relatives, playing the hypocrite before God and people without any cause, except that of a consciousness of his own insignificance—then tell how this young man squeezes the slave out of himself one drop at a time and how he wakes one fine morning to find that in his veins flows not the blood of a slave but real human blood.”

Chekhov believed in progress but was otherwise without politics. “I acquired my belief in progress when still a child,” he wrote. “I couldn’t help believing in it, because the difference between the period when they [his father and his teachers] flogged me and the period when they stopped flogging me was enormous.” As for this politics, in a letter to the writer Aleksey Pleshcheyev, he wrote: “I am not liberal, not a conservative, not a gradualist, not a monk, not an indifferentist. I should like to be a free artist and nothing more, and I regret that God has not given me the power to be one. I hate lying and violence in all their forms. I regard trademarks and labels as prejudicial.”

The writer Ivan Shcheglov criticized Chekhov for writing in his story “Lights” that “you can’t figure out anything in this world,” to which Chekhov, in disagreement, replied: “We shall not play the charlatan, and we will declare frankly that nothing is clear in this world. Only fools and charlatans know and understand everything.”

Chekhov carried such views over into his art. In reply to a criticism by Suvorin about the inconclusiveness of one of his stories, he wrote: “The artist is not meant to be a judge of his characters and what they say; his only job is to be an impartial witness.... Drawing conclusions is up to the jury, that is, the readers. My only job is to be talented, that is, to know how to distinguish important testimony from unimportant, to place my characters in the proper light and speak their language.”

Is such cool detachment—an author such as Chekhov who claims not to sit in judgment of his characters—desirable? Is it likely to be successful as art?

* Chekhov disliked Dostoyevsky’s work.

Commentary

Epstein March 2.10.indd 41 2/13/23 11:08 AM
possessed an extraordinarily fine delicate sense for pain in general.” This sense is aroused in extremis at the utterly degraded lives of the prostitutes he and his friends encounter at the brothels they visit. He cannot bear the thought that women lived in such moral squalor. Returning to his rooms, he becomes greatly agitated at the thought and attempts to devise ways to remove these women from their utterly degrading lives. His agitation grows deeper and deeper, leaving him on the edge of nervous breakdown.

Vasilev’s two friends, the medical student and the artist, call on him the next day and take him to a psychiatrist who interviews him, examines him, and provides medicine for him to drink. The despair lifts, “and the load under his heart grew lighter and lighter as though it were melting away.” The story ends: “In the street he stood for a while and, saying good-by to his friends, dragged himself languidly to the university.” The story provides a true picture of the lives of prostitutes, but of the conclusion to Vasilev’s spiritual travail we learn no more, nothing is resolved, no real ending is provided.

And so it is with many of Chekhov’s stories, which do not so much end as fade away.

His story “Peasants” tells of a man who loses his job as a waiter and must return to his peasant village with his family. An unrelieved account of the sordid details of peasant existence—the filth, the wife beating, the crowded conditions, the overall harshness of quotidian life—is set out. The man dies, owing to crude medical techniques. His wife and daughter depart the peasant village, with nothing but their vague religious hope for a better life. Brilliant material once again goes unresolved.

Even in “The Lady with the Lap Dog,” perhaps Chekhov’s most famous story, no resolution is offered, and the story ends with its two lovers, Anna Sergeyevna and Gurov, meeting for a final time at the theater, then parting. “She pressed his hand and walked rapidly downstairs, turning to look round at him, and from her eyes he could see she was really unhappy. Gurov stood for a while, listening, then when all grew quiet, he found his coat and left the theater.” Again: Brilliance of portrayal, detail, scene are all provided without anything resembling a satisfactory or minimally satisfying ending. The plane soars but never lands.

In Chekhov Becomes Chekhov, Bob Blaisdell offers a defense for what he calls “the open-endedness” of Chekhov’s stories. “Chekhov won’t comfort us with an answer that isn’t there,” he writes. He then quotes Chekhov, in a letter to Suvorin, noting that “the time has come for writers, especially those who are artists, to admit that in this world one cannot make anything out, just as Socrates once admitted it, just as Voltaire admitted it... And if an artist in whom the crowd has faith decides to declare that he understands nothing of what he sees—this in itself constitutes a considerable clarity in the realm of thought, and a great leap forward.”

Chekhov argued that it was the writer’s task “to depict life truthfully and to show in passing how much this life deviates from a norm.” He went on to claim that we do not really know what that norm is: “We all know what a dishonest deed is, but what is honor?—we do not know.” Really? I believe we do, and I also believe it is the writer’s task to set out, through the complications that life so often presents, how difficult it is to attain.

Although he could chronicle obsessions, depict love and cruelty, strike the lyrical note in his descriptions of nature, and much else, Chekhov chose not to render judgment of his characters. In “In the Ravine,” the character Asinya Abramovich, in anger after being written out of her father-in-law’s will, pours scalding water over the infant of the woman who replaces her in the will. This same woman, the murderer of a child, goes on in the story to become “a person of power” in her village, “handsome and happy, with the naive smile on her face.... Everyone is afraid of her in the house and in the village and in the brickyard.” Is Chekhov saying, or at least suggesting, that this is how a godless world works, with evil often going unpunished and the good made to suffer?

CHEKHOV HAS NOT been without his critics. Tolstoy, who loved Chekhov personally, did upbraid him for his suspension of judgment. He also praised him: “He is a strange writer. He throws words about as though at random, and yet everything in his writing is alive. And what great understanding! He never has any superfluous details, every one of them is either essential or beautiful.” Philip Rahv wrote that Chekhov “believed that life could be lived with intelligence and love, without coercion and false-
hood, at the same time as he concentrated on showing that life as actually lived was sad and boring,” and concluded with the faint praise that Chekhov was “an artist of unmistakable originality, though not of the very first order.”

Perhaps Chekhov’s harshest judge was D.S. Mirsky, who in his History of Russian Literature writes that “the unsurpassable isolation of human beings and the impossibility of understanding each other” is the idea that is at the heart of “almost every one of his stories,” yet “his characters are singularly lacking in individual personality.” His plays, Mirsky claims, are worse: “Even more than in his stories, the dominant note in Chekhov’s plays is one of gloom, depression, and hopelessness.” (“As long as I understand the order of things,” Chekhov wrote, “life is made up only of terrors, squabbling, and stupidities, all mixed up and in alternation.”) He goes on to criticize Chekhov’s prose, holding that “no Russian writer of anything like his significance used a language so devoid of all raciness and nerve,” adding that “of all Russian writers, he has the least to fear from the treachery of translation.”

The very godliness that is missing from Chekhov’s writing lends to fiction an aura of mystery, a weight, a variousness and richness unavailable without it. Without the possibility of a higher power, determining fate, dispensing an ultimate justice, characters in novels and stories tend to go flat, their destinies robbed of interest. Perhaps even vastly talented people, as Isaac Bashevis Singer had it, cannot be atheists.
The minority of American Jews who are either more religiously observant or politically conservative look at American Jewry and worry. Assimilation, demographic decline, and the collapse of a sense of Jewish peoplehood all contribute to a situation in which most Jews become either insufficiently supportive of a still embattled Israel or actively hostile to it. Meanwhile, the small rump of anti- or non-Zionist American Jews looks at the same situation and bemoans the political reality that the pro-Israel community is still able to rally most of America behind its efforts.

The hard left sees more than a century of Zionist activism in the United States as a confidence game or conspiracy to hoodwink Americans into suborning their national interests in favor of an ungrateful, militaristic, and oppressive Israeli state. They think that Israel ought to receive, at best, a sound thrashing from its American sponsor until it behaves more like American Jewish liberals and not like a people who understand that their survival depends on themselves and not the kindness of strangers who welcomed them into a uniquely tolerant nation. At worst, they think that an “apartheid state” on its way toward elimination deserves a policy of brutal pressure and isolation.

Explaining how this came about is the conceit of veteran Nation magazine columnist Eric Alterman’s ponderous new book, *We Are Not One: A History of America’s Fight Over Israel*. Though it is packed with excruciatingly dull detail about the infighting among American Jewry, Alterman’s tome provides little in the way of genuine insight or original historical analysis. For all of its veneer of scholarly effort, it is exactly the sort of heavy-handed, snide, and generally clueless effort one might expect from those who have been...
reading him at the Nation.

Alterman’s exegesis makes the banal point that pompous citations of Jewish unity, even in the heyday of postwar American Zionism, have always been more aspirational than descriptive. But Alterman isn’t just trying to make the case that Zionism is a heavy lift for Jews who live in a country in which sectarianism of any kind is despised by liberal elites—save, of course, for those who are designated victims by intersectionality theory, which alleges that beneficiaries of “white privilege” oppress people of color. His goal is to portray Zionists as propagandists for a Jewish national liberation movement, which he thinks demonstrates the validity of the criticisms against it.

Alterman is merely rehashing the claims of Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, whose 2007 book, The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy, asserted that the Zionist Israeli tail wags the American dog. What made their argument so risible was not just the façade of scholarly research with which they cloaked traditional anti-Semitic memes about Jews, money, and power. It was their conclusion that the victory of the Zionists was the hidden triumph of a network that encompassed pretty much the entire American political system. Perhaps Israel and its friends are bamboozling Americans to act against their interests, but they are only able to succeed in this effort because most Americans continue to believe that it is in their interests to support the one Jewish state on the planet that is also the sole democracy in the Middle East.

Indeed, the primary problem with the growing body of literature that seeks to explain the endurance of the U.S.-Israel alliance is that Israel’s enemies focus too much on trying to characterize Jewish opinions and influence. The inordinate attention given to what American Jews (who make up 2 percent of this nation’s population) say or do to advance that cause is more of a distraction than anything else.

As Walter Russell Mead points out in his exceptionally valuable The Arc of a Covenant, published last year, every administration from Harry Truman’s to Joe Biden’s has consistently acted in what it thought was America’s best interests, not those of Israel. While Alterman goes over much of the same ground as Mead in tracing the history of the U.S.-Israel relationship, he’s far more interested in highlighting the supposed illogic of American Jewish support for Israel than in understanding the complex dynamic between the United States and this speck of a country.

Contrary to the conspiratorial mindset of most of those raging at the supposedly all-powerful Israel lobby, the United States has not been consistently supportive of the Jewish state. Virtually every president, even Donald Trump, has at times rejected the advice of or actively sought to thwart the government in Jerusalem on issues large and small. Several, including Eisenhower, George H.W. Bush, and Barack Obama, were primarily interested in pressuring Israel into making deals with its enemies that most Israelis had good reason to believe were dangerous if not suicidal.

Alterman is not wrong to argue that, except for a relatively brief period after the Holocaust and during a time when Israel was fighting wars of survival against heavy odds, most American Jews of the mid-20th century were not that interested in Zionism. Zionists were clearly a minority among Jews in the decades leading up to World War II. But as the fate of European Jewry became more apparent to Americans in the 1940s, an understanding began to take hold that Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism, had been right about the necessity of creating a Jewish state.

Still, Alterman can’t resist turning American Zionists into the bad guys, even when it comes to the Holocaust. Recycling discredited revisionist historical interpretations about the period, he blames American Jewry’s relative indifference to the Shoah—and the decision of almost all of their leaders not to pressure President Franklin Roosevelt to try to rescue those of Hitler’s victims who were not yet slain—on an inordinate focus on fighting for a Jewish state in the postwar era. The argument is slanderous. While some of those leaders, such as Rabbi Stephen Wise, were Zionists, American Jewish reticence about the Holocaust was primarily motivated by a fear of provoking anti-Semitism. Wise was also motivated by fear; he was afraid of losing what little influence he had with FDR—not saving his chits for Zionism.

Commentary
In fact, the small group of disidents inside the United States who led the fight for rescue were the most militant Zionists of all—people such as Hillel Kook (then known as Peter Bergson) and the indefatigable writer Ben Hecht. They were supporters of the Jabotinskyite Revisionist movement. It was the ancestor of today’s Likud Party, the one leftists like Alterman so despise. This inarguable fact illustrates the level of Alterman’s cognitive dissonance.

One of the chief malefactors in Alterman’s effort to trace the ability of Zionists to galvanize support for Israel is Leon Uris, whose Exodus—the fictional 1958 account of the founding of the State of Israel—was made into a wildly popular film in 1960. Uris’s literary reputation was worse than negligible at the time and has not improved in the years since his death in 2003. With its pedestrian prose and potted history, Exodus is low-hanging fruit for critics of Zionism. Alterman mocks it as “a new bible” that allowed Jews to view Zionism through the “distorted lens” in which “tough Jews” were empowered while fighting against cartoonish Nazis, British bullies, and Arab bad guys. But Uris’s work resonated with the public, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, because, for all of its melodrama and sentimentality, Exodus accurately captured the reason why Zionism was necessary. In the 20th century, Jews could no longer remain passive and powerless but had to relearn those aspects of nationhood that involved self-defense and the assertion of their rights to their ancient homeland. If Exodus was powerful, it was not because it was a piece of agitprop disguised as a fairy tale about the creation of a Jewish state. It was because it treated that battle and the value of Jewish peoplehood as important.

While acknowledging Exodus’s power, Alterman’s belief that it was essentially fraudulent misses why it was so effective. Myths are, after all, essential to the history of all countries, as those on the left who are dedicated to shredding the reputations of America’s Founding Fathers well understand. Exodus was an essential part of the underground samizdat literature that fueled the revival of Jewish life in the former Soviet Union during the last decades of Communist despotism because it captured exactly why Jews who wish to retain their identity are willing to fight those who wish to wipe them out.

From his introduction to his concluding paragraphs, Alterman seeks to portray American support for Israel as the product of mythology about a fantasy version of Israel that existed only in the imagination of Leon Uris.

Some liberals, who are increasingly disillusioned by a Jewish state that embraces its Jewish nature and its obligation to fight its many enemies, may be represented by the woman he quotes as telling an Israeli critic of Israel’s policies who had traveled to America: “You have to understand that for us, Israel is a fantasy, and we would like to keep it that way. So please don’t come here and try to destroy this fantasy for us!”

Alterman’s version of Israel is the actual fantasy—a fantasy state that does not have to defend itself against those who would destroy it but chooses for some bizarre reason its own devising to fight rather than concede. Objective reality in the form of still-virulent anti-Semitism and the malevolence of those who plot the Jewish state’s end still point to Israel’s necessity and the justice of its self-defense. To his credit, Alterman laments the bankruptcy of both the Islamists of Hamas and the Palestinian Authority as well as the intellectual dead end of the BDS movement—but his beef against them seems primarily to be that their efforts marginalize the kind of anti-Zionism he supports.

Jewish leftists who seek to disarm Israel in part by discrediting Zionist ideas provide no coherent answer to the historical truths that proved Herzl and his successors horribly prophetic about the necessity of a Jewish state to protect a Jewish future. There is no good solution to the continuing and eternal Jewish need for refuge (at the very least), and that is why Alterman is right to hold little hope for the collapse of the U.S.-Israel alliance. Alterman’s We Are Not One deserves instant consignment to the ash heap of bad, tendentious history.
Pitying Poor Putin

The Greatest Evil Is War
By Chris Hedges
Seven Stories Press, 208 pages
Reviewed by Brian Stewart

The story of the human race is war,” said Winston Churchill. “Except for brief and precarious interludes, there has never been peace in the world, and before history began, murderous strife was universal and unending.” However disagreeable to modern sensibilities, this recognition of history as the story of hostilities between groups and tribes and later between nations and empires is rooted in reality.

As a species that has been hunter-gatherers for more than 200,000 years and whose brains have gone almost unchanged for 70,000 years, bloody tribalism seems to be an anthropological constant. The comforts of civilization have not vitiated the human impulse to compete and fight—often with stupendous brutality—in defense of only partially rational beliefs and ideas.

The outbreak of conflict among nations is therefore quite unremarkable, akin to the sun rising in the east. And yet, many today have convinced themselves that conquest and slaughter are aberrational. The notion that peace is the natural state of mankind has gained currency in recent years, owing in part to Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker, whose The Better Angels of Our Nature shows that we are living in the most peaceable age in the history of our species, marked by a conspicuous absence of war among great powers.

But this encouraging tendency is not proof of man’s evolutionary ascent into sunlit uplands. Rather, it’s the product of distinctive factors, foremost among them the global configuration of power and a liberal order underwritten by the strength and engagement of the United States. And it is anything but the historical norm.

Indeed, Vladimir Putin’s assault on Ukraine has already brought to an end our brief vacation from large-scale warfare. But the evidence is thin that we have come to recognize that the West must now rearm, militarily and intellectually. Instead, many across the West have carried on imagining that mankind is either getting ever more peaceable or (among more reactionary minds) that Russia does not pose a strategic threat to the United States or even to Europe. The Greatest Evil Is War, a new book by Chris Hedges, explicitly advances the latter argument.

Once a New York Times foreign correspondent, Hedges has long been an entrenched critic of American military action. In 2002, after al-Qaeda’s assault on American civil society, he published War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning, an exercise in moral relativism that sought to exculpate jihadists in their battle against civilization. The Greatest Evil Is War is a straightforward brief against fighting, but not of the high-minded variety. The book is a moralistic stream of consciousness drawn from firsthand experience in war zones and his haunting encounters with combatants, veterans, and civilians caught up in the bloody business. All the people we encounter in its pages have been wounded by conflict, and they bear the physical or psychological scars to prove it.

The book opens with a dubious proposition: “Preemptive war, whether in Iraq or Ukraine, is a war crime.” (Preemptive wars may be frowned on by international law, but neither Iraq nor Ukraine meets the standard of preemption, no matter what might be said in Moscow.) Hedges argues that whereas the war in Iraq was launched “on the basis of lies and fabrications,” Putin’s war followed “the breaking of a series of agreements with Russia” that left the hard men in the Kremlin feeling justifiably “threatened, betrayed, and angry.”

But for Washington’s broken promises after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Hedges suggests, the invasion would never have happened. Though he stops short ofcondoning Putin’s “special military operation,” what will provoke reflective readers is a manifest lack of moral outrage for Russia’s naked imperial enterprise. Meanwhile, we are treated to this kind of moral perversion: “What Russia is doing militarily in Ukraine … was more than matched by our savagery in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, and Vietnam.”

Hedges repeatedly claims that he has an “intimate understanding” of the instrument of war, and he goes to great lengths to convince us that, despite its “seductions,” he thoroughly disapproves of it. Against the German theorist Carl von Clause-
witz, he says—without even an attempt at substantiation—that war is not “politics by other means.” Instead, we are told that war is “demonic,” and Hedges produces a blizzard of quotations by the likes of Ernst Jünger, Theodor Adorno, and Kurt Vonnegut to carry the point.

The presumption that war is “the greatest of evils,” for all its prima facie appeal, arises from the modern misapprehension that resorting to arms can always be safely or honorably avoided. This has been argued, in one form or another, by everyone from the radical writer Randolph Bourne to Mahatma Gandhi. But it fails to withstand scrutiny, as exemplified by Hedges’s attempt to indict U.S. policy for, as he puts it, “spawning the [ISIS] Caliphate.” This misconstrues the roots of the Islamic State, which lie not in the U.S. intervention in Syria (after the birth of the Caliphate) but in the Assad regime’s savage repression of the popular uprising that grew out of the wider Arab revolt. What’s more, it was only the belated advent of U.S. airpower that rolled back the jihadist enclave. Thus Hedges simultaneously offers an exculpatory reading of Bashar al-Assad in the nasty humanitarian catastrophe the dictator engineered and exploits it to impugn U.S. power.

For a short book, The Greatest Evil Is War is highly repetitive. Hedges suggests again and again that war armaments, and the military-industrial establishment that produces them, can be justified only by self-serving politicians, generals, and other “courtiers to power.” (On these grounds, he issues a less-than-surprising defense of Trump voters who had no other way to register their displeasure with the “dreams of empire.”) In reality, the research and development of high-tech weaponry during peacetime yields greater dividends to this establishment than the mundane manufacturing of war armaments. Hedges nonetheless posits that the fruits of the defense budget redound almost exclusively to “war profiteers.” The claim is made en passant, as if it’s an uncontroverted fact. Tell it to the Ukrainians.

The only systematic arguments and persuasive prescriptions in the entire book come courtesy of the author’s ideological foes, whom he invokes and insults but doesn’t bother to rebut. These “Dr. Strangeloves” are America’s “war party,” which lusts for “apocalyptic global war.” One encounters this level of nuance on nearly every page.

Of course, to defend the concept of just war is not to deny that even the most justified of wars cause very terrible evils. Nor is it to attach any sanctity to organized violence. However, wars are not the sole or supreme evil in what Churchill called “the dark, lamentable catalogue of human crime.” Were it so, it would be easier for someone such as Hedges to command the moral high ground. But as George Orwell observed in 1941: “The choice before human beings is not ... between good and evil but between two evils. You can let the Nazis rule the world: that is evil; or you can overthrow them by war, which is also evil.... Whichever you choose, you will not come out with clean hands.”

But Hedges’s failure to wrestle with such bedeviling issues is not his greatest vice. He has the temerity to hail President Barack Obama for blocking arms “sales” to Ukraine while Russian forces were seizing Crimea and fomenting civil strife in the Donbas. Notwithstanding this exercise of restraint, Hedges lauds that the relentless assertion of U.S. hegemony “baited” Putin into invading Ukraine and flattening its towns and cities. Hedges, who had a show on the Kremlin-sponsored television network RT America before it was taken off the air in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine, cannot easily be acquitted of charges that he is a Kremlin fellow traveler.

In fact, he stands squarely in the tradition of prominent reactionaries (often disguised as “realists”), for whom the revival of the Cold War is not the result of Russia’s designs to restore its sphere of predominance from the Caspian to the Baltic Sea. The true culprit, from this vantage point, is the belligerency of the United States, culminating in NATO’s post–Cold War expansion, which ostensibly inflamed Russia’s security dilemmas. Unsurprisingly, the reader finds no such groveling on behalf of Ukraine’s security dilemmas. (Moscow’s flouting of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum that guaranteed Ukraine’s territorial integrity in exchange for the latter’s renunciation of nuclear weapons goes unmentioned.) From the perspective of supposed “anti-war” politics, only Russia’s interests deserve ungrudging respect.

Hedges concludes by calling for a “moratorium” on arms shipments to Ukraine, and he indicts the U.S. for scheming to “bog down Russian forces with Ukrainian corpses.” Of course, if the sight of Ukrainian corpses makes Hedges so queasy, perhaps he should consider how many fewer corpses there might have been if the U.S. had achieved deterrence before the struggle erupted in 2014. He might also consider how many more corpses there would have been in the absence of the lethal aid provided day and night by the West since last February.

What Hedges has forgotten, or perhaps never learned, is that some things are worth fighting for. Tragically, war is but one evil among many in this world. Moreover, war is the story of the human race, which is sufficient reason to recognize that it’s still interested in us, and probably always will be.
Bridges to the Soviet Union?

Harry Bridges: Labor Radical, Labor Legend
By Robert W. Cherny
University of Illinois Press, 512 pages

Reviewed by Harvey Klehr

A MAN named Harry Bridges founded the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) on the West Coast in the 1930s and led it for more than 40 years. He was a major figure in 20th-century American labor history—for good and ill. From the moment he emerged as the central figure in a 1934 strike that paralyzed the port of San Francisco, Bridges was denounced as a dangerous Communist, and for almost two decades Democratic and Republican administrations sought to send him back to his native Australia.

The Labor Department initiated failed deportation proceedings in 1939. The Department of Justice succeeded in 1941, only to have its order overturned by the Supreme Court in 1945. In 1948, the Immigration and Naturalization Service tried to prove that Bridges had committed perjury in 1945 when he swore in a citizenship hearing that he had not been a Communist. Found guilty, his citizenship was revoked, and he was sentenced to five years in prison. On appeal, he was exonerated once again by the Supreme Court in 1953. The attorney general of the United States immediately revived the denaturalization suit but lost in court in 1955.

Bridges fought not only the U.S. government but other unions. He was a thorn in the side of the International Longshoremen’s Association (ILA). A brief effort at unity with other maritime unions ended after disputes with the Teamsters and the Sailors’ Union of the Pacific. In 1949, Bridges’s ILWU was booted out of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) for its long-standing connections with the Communist Party.

Throughout these battles, Bridges retained the loyalty of the overwhelming majority of his members. Unlike virtually all the other Communist-dominated unions expelled from the CIO, the ILWU fended off raids on its membership and remained relatively healthy, successfully negotiating contracts with management. By the early 1960s, Bridges had improbably crafted a reputation as a labor statesman, inspired in part by a path-breaking Mechanization and Modernization Agreement (M&M) that his union reached with the Pacific Maritime Association, which gave its members pay raises, pensions, and a share of the savings achieved by the elimination of decades-old feather-bedding arrangements and the acceptance of labor-saving innovations. It paved the way for containerization, the practice that revolutionized longshore work and drastically downsized the port workforce.

Although widely hailed as a breakthrough in labor-management relations, M&M also stoked rank-and-file discontent. The ILWU leadership faced accusations that it had become too friendly with management. Efforts to protect older ILWU loyalists against layoffs also ran up against claims by black workers that the union discriminated. Together with the rise of the New Left, and an influx of young radicals into the union, these controversies even led the Communist Party of the day to accuse its long-time ally Bridges of class collaboration and opportunism.

Robert Cherny, a retired historian from San Francisco State University, has written a detailed account of Bridges’s life and achievements, using not only the extensive government files from his various prosecutions and the ILWU’s voluminous archives but also Bridges’s own papers, a number of interviews with him, and, crucially, CPUSA files in Russian archives. It is unlikely that a more complete story of the man will ever be told.

Harry Bridges: Labor Radical, Labor Legend makes no effort to hide the author’s admiration and enthusiasm for Bridges and his scorn and distaste for Bridges’s enemies. Cherny grudgingly accepts the truth of the latter’s claims that Bridges had indeed been a member of the American Communist Party for at least several years and shamelessly lied about it for his entire life.

Born in Australia to immigrants from England and Ireland in 1901, Alfred Renton Bridges grew up middle-class. Family tensions led him to spend increasing time on the waterfront, where he was influenced by the syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, familiarly known as “the Wobblies”). He became a sailor in 1917. Two years later, he shipped out of Australia for good, arriving in San Francisco in 1920.

Commentary
He was employed there as a longshoreman from 1922 to 1929. The work was not only physically taxing but dangerous, with injuries a frequent occupational hazard. A company union extorted dues from anyone wanting a job but provided few benefits. Malcontents or protestors were easily denied employment by “shape-ups” at the beginning of every day, when men seeking work were selected by gang bosses. Severely injured on the job in 1929, Bridges was forced to go on relief in 1932 after losing his small house and car.

In 1933, Bridges and several friends formed a left-wing caucus to work within the International Longshoremen's Association. With assistance and advice from Sam Darcy, the Communist Party's district organizer, Bridges's caucus slowly made inroads—and by 1934 he had become an officer of the ILA and the chairman of its strike committee.

In May 1934, longshoremen in San Francisco went on strike for two key demands. They wanted a union hiring hall and a Pacific Coast-wide contract to prevent shippers from playing different ports off against one another during labor-management disputes. The Pacific Maritime Association fought back, recruiting strikebreakers, equipping a freighter as a floating hotel for scabs, and using hundreds of police to disrupt pickets along the Embarcadero.

In July 1934, strikers attacked freight cars trying to move cargo and were met by police clubs and tear gas. Two were killed and hundreds injured as clashes continued throughout the city for hours. The governor called out the National Guard and took control of the port. Enraged unions called for a general strike that lasted for three days. The longshore work stoppage continued until September when arbitrators awarded the union, now led by Bridges, with a small pay raise, a six-hour day, a 30-hour week, and that hiring hall.

The victory made Bridges a national figure and amplified charges that he was a Communist. While his faction did include Communists, they were in a minority and the strikers’ demands had been formulated by non-Communists. Still, CPUSA organizer Darcy boasted that “there would have been no maritime or general strike except for the work of our Party,” further evidence to many that the longshoremen and Bridges were Party cat's-paws.

While Bridges did not enforce Communist orthodoxy within his union, he was vocal about his Marxist beliefs and taking advice and support from Communists. On all the major issues that divided Communists from the broader American left from the mid-1930s until the 1960s, Bridges reliably followed the Party line, from support for the Nazi-Soviet Pact, to endorsement of a no-strike pledge during WWII, to opposition to the Marshall Plan and the Korean War. Not until he criticized the Soviet invasion of Hungary did he publicly attack Soviet foreign policy; but it was a fleeting deviation; in the late 1970s, he even attacked the Polish Solidarity movement.

And yet, despite his unapologetic support for Communists and the Soviet Union until his death in 1990, Bridges consistently denied that he was a member of the Communist Party. During his seemingly ineliminable hearings, appeals, and trials, Bridges never invoked the Fifth Amendment, always swearing under oath that he had never belonged to the CPUSA. Cherny regards the question as far less important than his effectiveness as a union leader and insists that there is “no simple answer” to the complex question of whether Bridges was a Party member.

Numerous witnesses, many of them old comrades, did testify over the years that they had known him as a Party member, but many of them were sketchy. His first wife claimed she had seen his Party dues book and that there had been Party meetings at their home, but an affidavit from their divorce included her denial that she knew he was a Communist. At his final denaturalization trial in 1955, one witness who had supported Bridges in 1939 testified against him, while another who had testified that he had been a Communist now supported him.

Cherny has unearthed internal Party documents in which Communist leaders call Bridges a comrade, noting that he had been chosen for a Party district committee, and complain that he sometimes ignored Party directives. The most startling claim made by ex-Communists John Leech and Arthur Kent in public proceedings in 1939 was that Bridges had been elected to the CPUSA Central Committee in 1936 under the name “Rossi,” the same name as the anti-Communist mayor of San Francisco.

John Haynes and I discovered in Russian archives in the early 1990s a list of Central Committee members provided to the Comintern in 1937 by CPUSA leaders. Number 21 was “Rossi.” He was described as follows: “ROSSI (Bridges)—C.P. USA Central Committee member, President of the Dockers and Port Warehouse Workers’ Union. He is a strong leader in the trade movement and a mass worker, but up till now has only domestic party knowledge and experience.”

Cherny admits that this document is genuine and that “the simple answer to the question about [his] lying can only be yes, but a simple yes is not a complete answer.” Cherny reluctantly admits that he was a Party member. He hems and haws, explaining that Bridges was probably only a Party member for a short period of time, most likely from 1934 until the end of the decade.
Like other secret and important Party members, Bridges could avoid Party demands that others had to follow. And Cherny is right that his initial denial of Party membership landed him on a slippery slope where telling the truth became very difficult. Whatever his accomplishments as a union leader, Bridges was a serial liar and perjurer who gave his loyalty to a vile ideology and regimes that crushed independent unions. There is no evidence that he ever reflected on his good fortune that his fondest ideals were never realized in his adopted home.

Bucking the Trends

What Is Wrong with Our Schools? The Ideology Impoverishing Education in America—and How We Can Do Better for Our Students
By Daniel Buck
John Catt, 230 pages

Reviewed by Naomi Schaefer Riley

Wisconsin-based teacher named Daniel Buck once showed his high-school freshmen a documentary about the Great Depression, which mentioned that some American workers had moved to the Soviet Union during this period. When he asked the students why they thought this was, he writes, “the class gave me the silent stare that so many teachers dread.” He asked himself the questions he was taught to ask during his teacher training: “Had I framed the question poorly? Did I have an adequately accepting classroom culture?” As it turned out the problem was much more elementary. One student finally broke the silence: “Is the Soviet Union a country?”

Buck’s new book, What Is Wrong with Our Schools, is a powerful and succinct explanation of how we got here. As he notes, the kids in his district had learned “a smattering of U.S. and ancient history.” But any kind of instruction about the World Wars and the Cold War had been saved for later on in high school. “How could I possibly ask them to think critically about the Great Depression and the Soviet Union when they knew nothing about it?” he writes. “I might as well ask them to water a garden with an empty pail.”

While it is not uncommon or unwarranted to focus on the politicization of American classrooms—from critical race theory and gender-bending ideology to apocalyptic environmentalism and plain old cheerleading for the welfare state—the truth is that what’s destroying American education is the lack of actual content. The justifications for eliminating from the curriculum books with information in them have come in various forms. But at the heart of all of them is the idea that teaching is itself “oppressive.”

From John Dewey to the more recent pedagogical texts offered at almost every education school in the country, the message is clear: Students are best off when they are discovering things on their own. Memorization is to be avoided at all costs. Teachers are better off playing “guide on the side” rather than “sage on the stage.” Learning should be driven by student interest. Imparting skills is more important than imparting knowledge. The 21st century doesn’t care whether students know facts because they can look up everything on the Internet. All students need is to be trained in critical thinking.

What Is Wrong with Our Schools manages to debunk all of these myths in 200 pages, and if there’s any philanthropist out there willing to send a copy to every superintendent and school-board member in America, trust me, there are worse ways to spend money. Short of that, please give this book at baby showers. It will be much more useful than another onesie.

Let’s start with reading. Many American parents will recognize in their children’s classrooms the scenario Buck describes. Grade-school students are asked to pick books off the classroom shelf based on how many words they don’t know on a page. Once they have a “just right” book, they go off into corners of the room either in groups or alone and read. Middle-school students are asked to choose their own book or share one with two or three other kids and come up with subjects for discussion.

This choose-your-own-adventure strategy is at the heart of the Lucy Calkins Units of Study program, which has been employed in classrooms across the country for decades and was the subject of a New
When was the last time you heard a teacher suggest that the class should actually try to arrive at answers?

Again and again, Buck cites evidence from studies of educational settings with the same conclusions. Project-based learning, student-driven classrooms, and skills-based curricula are failing our kids. Children need and want instruction on actual subjects with regular assessments on what they have learned along with all of their classmates.

Buck contrasts this to the situation in class when he reads aloud To Kill a Mockingbird. He does it so that students “can experience the build-up and disappointment together.” He writes: “Every year someone lets a ‘No!’ slip out; when the bell rings, my students walk out of the classroom talking about how affecting that scene is.” Much is lost when the classroom “transitions to Rousseau-influenced workshop models,” he says. “The individual child’s interest is so centralized as to atomize the class; we no longer commune around books.”

Buck criticizes the relentless focus on “relatability” in choosing what children should learn. He notes that kids have a natural curiosity about things outside of their experience, and teachers should be exploiting that. Moreover, teaching students actual texts and important pieces of knowledge makes it easier for them to acquire more knowledge as they go on. Citing the work of E.D. Hirsch, Buck notes that acquiring more knowledge helps build more connections and creates more hooks for students to hang future learning on. Asking students to start from scratch every day and come to new discoveries on their own is not only ineffective, it is also extraordinarily frustrating. Education, he argues, is not all questioning: “We open our minds to close them again around something concrete.”

Come to think of it: That might be Buck’s most radical suggestion. When was the last time you heard a teacher suggest that the class should actually try to arrive at answers?

HOW HAVE we strayed so far from this older model of education? Of course, the nonsense on offer for teacher training is the root of the problem. But there are reasons that it has been so readily embraced. One of them is the fact that it allows principals and school boards to avoid the question of what should actually be taught. Buck is firmly on the side of teaching old books and teaching them to everyone, regardless of the reading level they are at. “Tradition provides the language and arguments we need to understand the present,” he writes. "Macbeth helps me to understand power-hungry politicians. The arguments between Booker T. Washington and WEB DuBois, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X help us to understand current debates over racial justice. These works provide the very language we use in our current debates. We cannot emancipate ourselves from tradition any more than an animal can emancipate itself from air.”

But Buck also sees the imparting of knowledge to his students as deeply practical: “Most people would consider a school a failure if its students were unable to comprehend a major newspaper.” He notes, “Professional writers assume a certain level of background knowledge. Otherwise newspapers would have sentences constructed out of end- less appositive phrases and clarifications… A writer in the New York Times will assume that we know certain foundational texts, major figures from history, general country locations and much more that they will not clarify. It would take too much time and too many words to do so.”

Educated adults should have a certain automaticity of knowledge—we don’t spend all day trying to get through a newspaper by googling where Germany is or what is contained in the Declaration of Independence or when Pearl Harbor was attacked. We should help students develop that, too. Not only in their academic subjects but in their personal habits, as well. When schools create expectations of punctuality, order in classrooms and hallways, and civil behavior, students are able to focus on the educational tasks in front of them. Throughout the book, Buck returns to this theme of how the leaders of schools are responsible for inculcating habits—habits that will free students to accomplish greater things. He uses Rousseau’s opposition to swaddling infants as a metaphor for explaining how the ideas that societal restrictions on children are detrimental to their proper development have shown themselves to be not only wrongheaded but deeply unhealthy and destructive.

When you start with the fundamental assumption that teaching is oppressive, it becomes all but impossible for teachers or administrators to put rules in place, let alone demand that students follow them. He notes the terrible consequences of recent bans on school suspensions or any kind of punishment for kids who misbehave. The students who are in the class cannot learn. Instead of thinking about the topic at hand, they are worried for their own safety. Buck, whose Twitter account I also recommend, regularly posts about the emails he gets from...
teachers who disagree with him on everything but who see an urgent need for school discipline both for their own safety and the well-being of their students.

Perhaps the fact that Buck is a teacher will allow this book to gain a greater audience. I am more cynical than Buck about some of these developments—student-driven learning can be a much easier lift for teachers who don’t want to do any actual work, such as creating lesson plans. Still, it’s fair to assume that most teachers do want their students to learn but have been sold a bill of goods when it comes to how best to make that happen. “The direct instruction part of [learning] is foundational,” Buck writes. “Without explanation, children cannot learn…. Phrased differently, students need a teacher.” From Daniel Buck’s lips to God’s ears. ✤

Waxing Roth

Endless Flight:
The Life of Joseph Roth
By Keiron Pim
Granta Books, 544 pages

Reviewed by Frederic Raphael

Endless Flight: The Life of Joseph Roth is a thoroughly researched and enthralling biography of a writer long underrated, not least by those embarrassed by his louche life and lack of unambiguous allegiance to Jewishness, let alone Zionism. Joseph Roth was born in 1894 in Galicia, where it was wise for Jews to keep their sidelocked, black-brimmed heads down. The poorest people were “see-traders”—Hasidim ready to sell anything they saw. (While smuggling and crossing the border, they spread blankets to defeat footprints in winter snow.) Clever Joseph’s prize-winning essay at school was called “On Oppor-
tunism and Compromise.” What more apt topic for an examinee set to become a forever unsettled journalist, travel writer, and novelist?

Cosmopolitan Vienna was the place to go and shine. Assimilation to German courtesies, accent, and language served to efface the uncompromising, Yiddish-speaking provincialism that Roth would later revisit with morbid rue. Keiron Pim, a young British biographer, defines him as “double throughout his life.” The charge of duality or duplicity has been leveled at so many Jews in so many contexts that it all but smacks of a collective accusation. Yet what better equipment for a writer? In the field of European literature, the fruit of Jewish irresolution has been a rich crop, dialogue its flower: Proust, Kafka, Arthur Schnitzler, Italo Svevo (Aron Hector Schmitz), Vasily Grossman, and many others.

In his first single year as a Viennese journalist, from April 1919, Roth wrote 140 pieces for Der Neue Tag, many under the byline Josephus. Pim reads this as an allusion to Flavius Josephus, the ancient Jewish historian (in Greek) of the disastrous war of 66–70 C.E. which led to the Jews being dispossessed both of Jerusalem and of the individual state refounded by the Maccabees. The Josephs were alike as witnesses of catastrophe, current and imminent.*

Austrian patriot, nostalgic Galician, Parisian expatriate, dandy and down-and-out, always on the move, Roth was his own most mutable, memorable creation. Buried in a Catholic cemetery, apostasy played little part in his versatility, though he did come to fancy a tipple on Communion wine. At his early peak, he was a bespoke-tailed cock of Vienna’s Herrenhof café, his arrogant wit dispensed in the accent of a distinguished Austrian. By his side, his bride, beautiful Friedl Reichler, was a docile emblem of his having made it. Her decline into bedridden misery would haunt but never detain him. As with Alfred Tennyson’s Sir Lancelot, faith unfaithful kept him falsely true.

Success stimulated his facility but never blinded him to the grim aftermath of the Great War that reduced Austria to the rump of the ramshackle empire of long-lived Franz-Josef. “My so-called subjectivity,” he wrote, “is in the highest degree objective. I can smell things another won’t be able to see for another ten years.” A true boast: He is the first journalist known to have mentioned Adolf Hitler in print, as early as 1923.

A year later, he was reporting on the cortege of veterans following... 

* Pim has it that the original Josephus sided with the Romans. The truth is more complicated. First a Jewish general, then captured, he did indeed go over to the Romans, both to save his neck and, more important, to devote himself to calling on the Jews to reject the Zealots in their city and come to terms while they still had the chance. His abiding concern was the preservation of the city and Herod the Great’s temple as the fulcrum of Judaism. Driven, in disastrous fact, finally to seek sanctuary in Rome, Josephus wrote a history in which there is no sort of call for “assimilation,” apostasy never.
the funeral of Jana Josa, who had addressed the Union of Disabled Veterans of the Polish Republic and, for a finale, shot himself in the head. Another ominous year later, the Social Democrat German president, Friedrich Ebert, died and the antique Marshal Hindenburg, author of the stab-in-the-back excuse for Germany’s defeat in 1918, was elected in his place. Though he continued to write for the German press, left and right, Roth took the train for Paris. He described himself as a “hotelpatriot”: “I s—t on furniture. I hate houses.” Hotels let you come and go whenever you want.

The last word in his early novel, Hotel Savoy, is “America.” For Roth, the New World was a land of greater promise than Palestine. Zionism struck him from the first as a delusion and later as some kind of cousin to National Socialism, a fantasy of muscular solidarity for a people whose strength lay in the vigor, when they had it, of disparate genius: “In seeking a homeland of their own...700,000 idiots of Zion are rebelling against their deeper nature.... Not only are they not cleverer [than other people], they are even sometimes more stupid.” His ability to smell the future here eluded him.

Roth’s 1932 masterpiece, The Radetzky March, is a lean trilogy of ironic nostalgia for the triumphant, ramshackle Austria-Hungary of his youth. As the 1930s goose-stepped toward catastrophe, he attached improbable hope to the restoration of Otto von Habsburg (a good man, time would tell) as a bulwark against the demonic Adolf. Meanwhile, he found himself intermittently at peace in France. He saw Avignon, once the seat of dissident popes, as the symbol of Roman Catholic tolerance and, above all, pan-European culture. He hoped, seriously, that after a large donation, conveyed by Louis Hagen, a convert who had become papal chamberlain, the Vatican would ban communicant Catholics from belonging to the heathen Nazi Party. The arrival in 1939, of the collusive Eugenio Pacelli who, as Pope Pius XII, had already shut down the middle-of-the-road German Catholic newspaper to accommodate the Führer, put an end to any such fantasy.

A prolonged visit to the USSR in 1926 had collapsed Roth’s illusion, fostered by the brief eminence of Trotsky, that anti-Semitism could be purged by Communism. Having listened to the cliché-ridden discourse of young comrades incapable of forming a simple honest sentence after being trained never to think for themselves, he recurred to royalism, to the disdain of his accidental fellow-traveler Walter Benjamin.

The sententious Benjamin would declare Roth displeasing to look at as he himself continued to lug his Red illusions all the way through the 1930s to his own suicidal terminus at Portbou, on the Franco-Spanish border, in early 1940.

Roth did not live so long but continued, as his fortunes collapsed into boozy penury, to produce works of savage irony. Self-pitying but never whining, he continued to read the world sans illusions. From the Hotel Jacob, on the Left Bank, he wrote to the still affluent Stefan Zweig: “Hell reigns. The barbarians have taken over.” He warned his patient benefactor that his “serene, seemingly elevated” manner would be no protection: “They will burn our books and mean us.” Zweig’s own illusion of immunity ended in his fugitive suicide in Brazil in 1942. Roth had already been dead three years.

Joseph Roth is worthily pieced together by Keiron Pim as the scarred monument of lost cosmopolitan culture. What new rough beasts slouch towards wherever they will make their Bethlehem?
HOLLYWOOD COMMENTARY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 56

and your wife or husband. But the crew is paid to lay dolly track and pull focus and lift stuff and plug stuff in, to build living rooms and hang exterior trans lights and try not to get electrocuted. Fake laughter is way, way down on their list of services.

So when the camera operator laughs, it matters. When the guy moving cable waits a few moments to watch the end of a scene, believe me, it means the scene is worth watching.

I haven’t been to any of the rehearsals for NBC’s new smash-hit comedy, a reboot of the sitcom Night Court, which originally ran on the network from 1984 to 1992. But I’m pretty sure the crew is laughing.

The new Night Court is pretty much the same as the original. It takes place at a Manhattan arraignment court and co-stars John Larroquette, who reprises his role from the original as an attorney. The collection of characters is also revived: There’s a wisecracking bailiff, a court stenographer, and assorted lowlifes and petty criminals.

In fact, the revived classic is about as traditional as they come: It’s an ensemble multi-camera sitcom filmed before a live studio audience. And it’s the biggest hit on broadcast television, with a weekly audience of nearly 7 million.

“Absolutely stunned,” is how Channing Dungey, the chairman of Warner Bros. Television, one of the studios behind the series, described her reaction to the gigantic audience that greeted the show’s premiere.

“Positive memories” of the original is what Susan Rovner, the chairman of Entertainment Content at NBCUniversal Television, the network home of Night Court, guessed was responsible for a big part of the show’s success.

I’d suggest, on the other hand, that it’s a lot simpler. The rebooted Night Court is obeying the rules I learned 30 years ago: The show is filled with funny words (always at the end of the sentence), and there are jokes to cover the action. In other words, it’s a comedy that wants to be a comedy, instead of what’s on a lot of other networks, which are comedies that want to be rueful and wry meditations on the broken relationships we all have with one another, our colleagues at work, and ourselves.

And at which the crew most emphatically is not laughing.

I also haven’t been to any of the rehearsals for the upcoming reboot of Frasier, one of the most honored television comedies ever, but a friend of mine who is working on the crew of the new series sent me this terse assessment: “Frasier reboot v. fun and v. v. funny.” Which is a very good sign.

At a rehearsal a few years ago, we realized we needed a better button to end a scene. But before I could suggest one, the lead actress in the project—and the principal player in the scene—waved me away. “I got it,” she said. “We don’t need a line.”

And she proceeded to play the scene until the time came for her exit, at which point she stood by the door, delivered her last line, popped a piece of candy in her mouth—I think it was a mint, or possibly a licorice drop, and I have no idea where she got it—and walked out.

The crew loved it. Which meant that later in the week, the audience loved it, too.

Some people, like Julia Duffy, the actress who ate the candy, are funny. They can pop a piece of mint into their mouth at just the right tempo and with a precisely calibrated glance, and then we’re laughing, and the exit is covered. If you tell a dramatic actor you’re working on the button or give him or her a joke to cover the cross, they’ll look at you with withering contempt. But a comic actor knows these things instinctively. A comic actor knows how to pop a piece of licorice into her mouth and exit to exploding laughter.

The title character of Shakespeare’s Othello, for instance, is the least funny—and let’s be honest, the least interesting—character in the play. The real star, as everyone who has read it knows, is Iago. He has the funniest lines, the cleverest speeches, the most darkly comic dialogue of the play. And it’s why—as every actor who has ever played Othello can tell you—it’s Iago who gets the most thunderous applause at the curtain call.

And the baffled look on the face of the actor playing Othello is exactly like the look on the face of a studio or network executive with an unexpected hit comedy on his or her hands, trying to fathom the mystery of why the audience loves the funny guy, when it’s really about sticking to the three rules: Put the funny word at the end, get a joke to cover the cross, and check to make sure the crew is laughing. Everything else is just unnecessary drama.▷
A FRIEND OF MINE told me that a certain legendary television writer once dispensed this bit of wisdom, which for my money is the single best piece of advice I’ve ever heard about how to succeed in show business or anywhere else. As my friend walked nervously into the writers’ room on his very first day in the television business, the old pro took him aside and said to him in a gravelly murmur, “Keep it shut.”

I wish someone had given me that advice on my first day, about 30 years. I was pitching a joke in the writers’ room of TV’s long-running, phenomenally popular comedy *Cheers*. The actual joke is forgotten—it wasn’t a good one. I didn’t pitch anything good, or even decent, for a while. But I was young, and it was my first real job, and so I knew about what someone who was 24 knows, which is to say, nothing.

I didn’t know I knew nothing, of course, until the guy sitting next to me, David Lloyd—a legendary comedy writer, the lion of the writers’ room—pointed it out. “Try putting the funny word at the end of the sentence,” he said. “And then try writing a funny sentence,” he continued, not bothering to add, “you idiot.”

I sat there, stung and embarrassed, and I thought, Man, that guy’s mean. Which wasn’t true. He was a professional. And by the end of the day, I had learned three important rules about writing television comedy.

The first you already know: Put the funny word at the end of the sentence. The second: Every time a character enters or exits or moves across the stage, and every time a scene begins or ends, there must be a joke. In a classic television comedy, everything turns on the joke.

Which just isn’t fair! Dramas in film and on television routinely just cut away to the next scene or linger on a character as he or she ambles along spouting dramatic dialogue without a funny word anywhere, let alone at the end of the sentence.

Not to mention, characters in dramas—and people in real life, for that matter—are perfectly comfortable entering and departing rooms without first thinking of something funny to say as they walk in or out. But comedy is more demanding than either drama or real life. Every scene needs a button; every walk across the stage needs a laugh. People who do comedy just have to work harder.

The third lesson is: During every rehearsal, check to see if the crew is laughing. “Is the crew laughing?” is one of the questions we ask all the time on a comedy shoot. Because unlike the writers and producers and studio executives, they’re not paid to laugh. Or, to put it more honestly: They’re not paid enough to pretend to enjoy something they’re not enjoying.

The most expensive laughter in Hollywood is the fake kind. You get it from your agent and your manager and your lawyer.

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

*Politics & Ideas : March 2023*
YOU DESERVE TO KNOW THE TRUTH...

Demand Justice for Jewish Students

New report shows skyrocketing attacks on students’ Jewish identity—rooted in anti-Zionism, a modern disguise for classic antisemitism. It’s time to fight back.

Despite rising campus attacks on Israel, most Jewish students still support the Jewish state. But anti-Zionist hatred in the classroom and public square forces many students to hide their Jewish identity. Greater enforcement of Title VI anti-discrimination laws promises a cure to this injustice.

What are the facts?

According to a new report by AMCHA Initiative, bullying and intimidation of Jewish students on university campuses tripled in the last year, while attempts to censor Zionism increased six-fold. Calls to reject Jewish identity trips to Israel increased nearly 20-fold. Reminiscent of Jewish persecution in 1930s Nazi Germany, some 50% of U.S. Jewish students say they hide their Jewish identity, according to a 2021 poll by the Brandeis Center for Human Rights.

While discrimination against most ethnic minorities is strictly censored on campus, university administrators have generally failed to protect Jewish students from attacks against them. Fortunately, a spate of complaints recently filed with the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR) now demand redress under Title VI anti-discrimination statutes. Currently, George Washington University, City University of New York, University of Vermont, University of Illinois and University of Southern California are among schools facing OCR investigation for alleged antisemitism violations.

Not surprisingly, the AMCHA report implicated pro-Palestinian groups, such as Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) for responsibility in targeting Jewish students. Indeed, the report found that anti-Zionist groups like SJP were the largest overall contributors to attacks on Jewish identity. Despite their pattern of stoking antisemitic hate, to date only a single chapter of SJP has been permanently shut down on a U.S. campus—at New York’s private Fordham University. The ban was upheld in court.

AMCHA’s report also noted the contribution of nominally Jewish anti-Zionist groups and individuals to the assault on Jewish identity. One such group is Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), which uses its spurious Jewish identity as cover for antisemitism.

Bad enough that Jewish students are targeted for persecution by their peers, but even worse when university faculty support the persecution. No wonder, according to AMCHA, that universities with faculty who support the BDS movement were three to seven times more likely to suffer attacks on Jewish identity. In fact, AMCHA found that “twenty percent of threats to Jewish identity took place at events supported by academic faculty.”

Sadly, without federal intervention, there’s little hope universities will stop antisemitic attacks. Tragically, Jewish students who feel their Jewish identity is threatened can seldom rely on their schools’ harassment policies to protect them. These policies usually forbid harassment based on one’s ethnicity or religion, but in most cases, university administrators do not recognize hostility toward Israel and its supporters as a religious or ethnic issue.

This approach by university administrators ignores the definition of antisemitism established by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), which is recognized worldwide and includes discrimination and demonization based on anti-Israel hate.

Fortunately, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 may offer powerful recourse for Jewish students under attack. Because the statute prohibits discrimination based on ethnic identity, recent complaints to the OCR emphasize the integral connection between Zionism and Jews’ historic relationship to their ancestral home, the land of Israel. Indeed, Zionism is not a political opinion—it is a fundamental feature of Jewish ethnic identity. Likewise, the Jews are not simply a religious group, but rather a people who also share language, culture, ancestry and a powerful territorial heritage.

While violations of Title VI do not carry criminal penalties, their costs can be massive. First, recipients of federal government funding—which represents millions, even tens of millions of dollars for most universities—can be refused or revoked. Second, the OCR can require that causes of violations be remedied—ensuring Jewish students will no longer suffer attacks by students or faculty for their Zionist beliefs. Third, the reputational damage caused by civil rights violations can wreak untold damage on university fundraising and student recruitment efforts.

Attacks against Jewish students represent an assault on the American social fabric and our democracy. Higher-education administrators should be ordered by their regents to shut down all forms of antisemitism, especially in the form of discriminatory, demonizing anti-Zionism. Schools that fail to suppress these acts of hate should be prosecuted aggressively under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. Punishment must be costly, painful and swift. Jewish students deserve better than the current hostile environment.

This message has been published and paid for by FLAME

Facts and Logic About the Middle East
P.O. Box 3460, Berkeley, CA 94703
James Sinkinson, President
Gerardo Joffe (z”l), Founder
FLAME is a tax-exempt, nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization. Its purpose is the research and publication of facts regarding developments in the Middle East and exposing false propaganda that might harm the United States, Israel and other allies in the region. You tax-deductible contributions are welcome.

To receive free FLAME updates, visit our website: www.factsandlogic.org
I give because it cuts through the chaos.

“Because of the Novus Society, the people at DonorsTrust have made time for our silly questions and connected us with others—both peers and seasoned donors—that help us think through where we are now and where we want to be.”

— Denise Weaver, Novus Society at DonorsTrust giver

I give with the Novus Society.