2024:
THE NIGHTMARE AHEAD OF US

JOHN PODHORETZ

CRIMINALS AND THEIR APOLOGISTS
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THE LEFT OF THE RIGHT
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To the Editor:

ABE GREENWALD cites high voter turnout as a positive sign for our nation (“The Trust Crisis,” July/August). But there is, alas, another side to the story. High voter turnout is not necessarily a good thing. When a lot of people vote, it means they are worried. High turnout in today’s America reflects the strength of the polarization in our society. More people voting for their preferred candidates does not bring society together.

Somewhere in the range of 60 percent voter turnout is the sweet spot. There is a majority who vote. Among the nonvoters, of course, there is a small minority who feel totally alienated from the system and would never vote. But there is also a substantial group who feel comfortable with the way things are. Their garbage gets picked up. They’re okay with the schools their kids attend, and so on. They don’t bother to vote. When this group starts to vote, they’re worried. That’s when you know there’s a problem.

Gerald Stanton
Salisbury, Connecticut

To the Editor:

THE TRUST CRISIS” is a well-written account of most of the ills plaguing our country.

The problem is exacerbated by the blind obedience and loyalty among members of the Democrat Party as well as Donald Trump’s base. These voting factions will not even acknowledge the slightest disappointment in their own sides. It doesn’t matter what they’re shown in terms of facts and evidence. They will simply not admit to any deficiencies in their team.

The overall failings of government haven’t helped either. There had long been a sense that the American government was morally righteous but involved in occasional bad things for good reasons. That isn’t so anymore. Every government organizational acronym—DOJ, FBI, CIA, NSA, IRS, DEA, ATF—now brings corruption to mind. They have thoroughly lost our trust. This is to say nothing of our deeply uneven legal system, in which we witness prosecutions and punishments that are out of line with any moral or logical system.

But the primary driver of Americans mistrust is our being forced to accept progressive ideas that we don’t really believe in.

David Mari
Palm City, Florida

October 2023
To the Editor:

THOUGH ABE GREENWALD’S article on trust is sobering, it is also encouraging. I, too, believe that America is stronger than we realize and our center will hold.

I especially thank Greenwald for his clarity on the ludicrous and destructive gender propaganda flooding the nation. He is right to name all the leading psychological and psychiatric associations that have succumbed to the popular lies. Our children are being indoctrinated and maimed, and it terrifies the average voter.

DEBORAH HALL
Chautauqua, New York

To the Editor:

I THANK ABE GREENWALD for putting in words the comprehensive discomfort I have been sensing over the past few years. We are faced with a thick forest of mistrust but too often roped into arguing about the merits of a particular tree here or there. Greenwald has provided a map of the forest, which is necessary to facilitate the larger discussion of mistrust in America.

CLAY LITTLEFIELD
Charlotte, North Carolina

Abe Greenwald writes:

GERALD STANTON is wise to point out the distressing aspects of high voter turnout. But in a time of crisis, it’s healthy for citizens of a democratic republic to be worried and express their concern. They’re not hysterical—they’re right. My point was that it’s now heartening to see, given that so many Americans claim not to trust our elections at all. That significant numbers of them still consider voting a meaningful way to hold government accountable.
Oliver’s Story

To the Editor:

I was disappointed to read Rabbi Meir Soloveichik’s “The Boy Who Thought He Shouldn’t Run,” in the July/August issue, knowing that the actual events were significantly different from those Rabbi Soloveichik relied on in formulating his column.

Sometimes stories are portrayed in ways that lack the context, nuance, and complexity of a situation, and they are boiled down to a narrative that is more understandable for a wider audience. That is the case with the ESPN article and documentary that shares the journey of one of the students at my school and that Rabbi Soloveichik quotes exclusively in his column. Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School (CES-JDS), an independent, pluralistic Jewish day school, does not plan activities, sporting events, or other competitions on Shabbat. However, as a pluralistic Jewish day school, we have permitted students who choose to participate in individual activities that are offered on Saturdays outside of the school context in ways that maintain Sabbath observance. Students may attend journalism conferences, Junior States of America convenings, debate competitions, and other activities where they are provided kosher food, can pray together, and travel before the onset of sundown on Friday evening. There are also activities, such as robotics competitions, in which the school does not permit participation over the Sabbath.

Over the years, many religiously observant and Orthodox student runners have traveled with their families before Shabbat to stay in hotels or homes in close proximity to the meet locations in order to participate in meets like the one described in the ESPN article. We have permitted these students to participate, and unlike what is portrayed by ESPN, there is no pressure on a student to participate. This is similar to academic competitions and other activities in which, according to many rabbis and their understanding of Jewish law, students are not violating Shabbat in the actual activity.

The ESPN documentary, upon which Rabbi Soloveichik’s article relies, was initially meant to highlight two students who had different approaches to competing on Shabbat. One student, who felt completely comfortable participating, is religiously observant and comes from a Modern Orthodox observant home. Oliver, the student in the ESPN article who has become steadily more observant and comes from a less religiously practicing family, chose not to participate. When the school was approached by ESPN, the half-hour documentary was intended to highlight the different ways religiously observant students balance their commitment to Jewish practice with involvement in society—a topic central to life at a pluralistic Jewish day school. The seven-minute film that ultimately was produced focused instead on just one student’s personal journey and does not fully represent the actual events. Anyone who is truly familiar with our cross-country running coach and the culture of the school’s team knows the deep support and respect that Oliver received both during this incident and throughout his years as a student, which is what cultivated his love of running.

I would suggest that the salient story here, one that historians will analyze, is the variety of ways that contemporary American Jews and their communal organizations practice, adapt, and engage their Judaism while participating in an open and free American society that welcomes diverse expressions of religion and culture. In fact, as the historian of American Jewish history Jonathan Sarna suggests,
Jewish day schools serve as the "primary setting where American Jews confront the most fundamental question of Jewish life: how to live in two worlds at once, how to be both American and Jewish, part of the larger society and apart from it." Oliver's growth as a Jew was fostered in such an environment over many years.

CESJDS is a dynamic expression of contemporary American Jewish life where a broad cross section of Jewish students (over 22 percent identify as Orthodox) come together to study Tanakh (the Bible), Talmud, Jewish history, and Hebrew in addition to their secular studies. It is a place where students in our upper school have a choice of 14 different prayer options each morning, ranging from Sephardic and Ashkenazi Mehitza (separation between boys and girls) to altering (the separation between boys and girls) to altering and Ashkenazi (separation between boys and girls) to alternative opportunities that explore Jewish spiritual life through the arts, journaling, meditation, and movement. It is a place where students and their families genuinely build community out of the many differences that characterize Jewish life in American today. Pluralistic schools can be messy, and they also teach students to understand and develop familiarity with practices and beliefs that differ from their own. They afford students the opportunity to enrich and enhance their own identity significantly, as they confront, debate, and grapple with difference. Students gain a greater appreciation for the totality of what it means to be Jewish and the varieties of expression serious Jewish engagement takes.

While I appreciate that pluralistic Jewish day schools may not be the choice of staunch denominationalists, they are a representation of Jewish life in American today. I invite Rabbi Soloveitchik to visit CESJDS to get a true understanding of the dynamic and supportive Jewish community we have built at our school.

Rabbi Mitchell Malkus
Head of School, Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School
Rockville, Maryland

Meir Soloveichik writes:

THANK RABBI MALKUS for his letter, and for his gracious invitation to visit the Charles E. Smith School. I remain puzzled, however, by his correspondence, as it seems to dismiss assertions made by the ESPN reporting on which my article was based, without specifying a single assertion that Rabbi Malkus deems untrue.

Let us briefly review the reported incidents I discussed in my piece. ESPN tells us that Oliver was psychologically bullied by his teammates, who deliberately created a group chat from which he was excluded. Does Rabbi Malkus mean to tell us that this never happened?

We are also told that Oliver was essentially instructed by his mother that he owed it to “the Jewish people” to run on the Sabbath. Does Rabbi Malkus deny that Oliver’s mother said this to ESPN? Oliver is quoted by ESPN as saying that he experienced “a lot of yelling and getting mad” from his “teammates, my coach, my school, my mom.” Were these stories manufactured? Was Oliver lying? Rabbi Malkus does not seem to make this claim, only telling us that ESPN’s article lacked “context, nuance, and complexity.” I would be delighted to learn that there are other elements to this story not included in the ESPN article, but that would not make the pressure that Oliver experienced any less wrong. But if ESPN’s reporting was in any way truly problematic, then the Charles E. Smith Day School should have immediately decried the documentary and the parallel published piece.

Here, however, is what is most striking: When the original ESPN reportage appeared, the Charles E. Smith Day School seems to have embraced it and appeared quite proud of what had occurred. I am not aware of any statement from the school denouncing or denying the documentary or the piece; on the contrary, a screening of the documentary was held at the school, and Rabbi Malkus participated. According to a report at the school newspaper, Oliver’s coach reflected that “one of the best kinds of outcomes of this feature is that people are talking about it.” Rabbi Malkus himself tweeted about ESPN’s reporting, seeming quite proud of the story that appeared in it, providing the YouTube link where it could be viewed, making no mention in the tweet of the possibility that it was in error, or even that it lacked “context, nuance, and complexity.” What are we to make of this? Is it possible that school leadership initially sought to revel in the publicity stemming from Oliver’s story, only later realizing that there are elements to it that are truly reasons for dismay, elements that do not cast certain aspects of Oliver’s school experience in a fully positive light?

I close by wishing Rabbi Malkus a shana Tovah, a joyous new year for him and his students, a year in which the blessing of Jewish unity will make itself manifest.
The Left of the Right

MATTHEW CONTINETTI

If you tuned in to the first Republican Party presidential debate of the 2024 cycle, you may have suffered ideological whiplash. The eight candidates onstage in Milwaukee—minus the far-and-away front-runner, Donald Trump—argued every which way over legal, economic, social, and foreign-policy questions. The party’s ideological and policy incoherence was on full display. Did Mike Pence do the right thing on January 6, 2021? Where should Republicans draw the line on abortion? Does military aid to Ukraine and Israel make America stronger? Is an indicted, and possibly convicted, Trump an electoral asset or a liability? There was no consensus.

But there was genuine conflict. Mike Pence and former South Carolina governor Nikki Haley jousted over pro-life policy. Haley went after her fellow Palmetto State pol, Senator Tim Scott, on federal spending. Former Arkansas governor Asa Hutchinson suggested that the 14th Amendment disqualifies Trump. And everybody piled on Vivek Ramaswamy, the 38-year-old businessman who stole the show by flouting conventional opinion, generating controversy, and otherwise behaving like an obnoxious know-it-all.

Ramaswamy said the former and current elected officials on stage were “bought and paid for.” He defended his evolving views on the Capitol riot and clashed with Haley over aid to Israel and the stakes in Ukraine. He said the “climate-change agenda” is a hoax and pledged to shut down the FBI. He kept referring to former vice president Pence as “Mike.”

Ramaswamy’s glib manner, changing opinions, and utter shamelessness irritated his fellow candidates. But his smugness paid dividends. At this writing, Ramaswamy has moved into third place in the RealClearPolitics average of national polls, seven points behind Ron DeSantis and 47 points behind Trump. Ramaswamy is the sort of figure who could exist only in the shadow of the former president: a hyperactive operator cynically using the populist social-media ecosystem to advance his personal brand.

Ramaswamy embodies the GOP’s current crisis. Republicans haven’t issued a platform since 2016, and it shows. What the party stands for is no longer central to its identity. Enraptured by Trump, the GOP’s vanguard longs above all for outsiders who promise to rebuke the left, upend the political system, and restore America to lost glory. The details are to be filled in later. In today’s GOP, positive messages and government experience are out; novelty, conspiracy theory, and a sense of foreboding are in. “It is not ‘Morning in America,’” Ramaswamy told Pence. “We live in a dark moment, and we have to confront the fact that we’re in an internal sort of cold cultural civil war.”

This vision—America on the precipice in a war that promises to destroy the country and all of Western civilization—has put Ramaswamy at the vanguard of the Republican Party’s newest “New Right.”

Matthew Continetti is director of domestic policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute and author of The Right: The Hundred-Year War for American Conservatism.

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wamy speaks for those Republicans, many of them young and very online, who believe that the GOP ought to be remade in Trump’s image.

In the New Right’s view, Reagan-era Republicans had a few accomplishments between 1980 and 2008 but have had little useful to say in the years since. That is why the New Right network—which includes media and technology personalities such as Tucker Carlson, Elon Musk, and David Sacks, and legacy institutions such as the Heritage Foundation—wants radically to revise the Right’s positions on foreign intervention, free markets, and limited government.

The first thing to say about the New Right is that it can get weird. Its ranks are composed almost entirely of men. They inhabit a social-media cocoon where they talk a lot about manhood, and strength, and masculinity, and push-ups, and masculinity, and virility, and weight-lifting, and testosterone. “Wrestling should be mandated in middle schools,” write Arthur Milikh and Scott Yenor in the collection *Up from Conservatism*. “Students could learn to build and shoot guns as part of a normal course of action in schools and learn how to grow crops and prepare them for meals. Every male student could learn to skin an animal and every female to milk a cow.”

The second aspect of the New Right that deserves attention is its flirtation with anti-Semitism and racism. Earlier this year, one of the contributors to *Up from Conservatism*, the international-relations scholar Richard Hanania, was revealed to have written hateful Internet posts under a pseudonym. The pro-Trump Breitbart wunderkind who had promoted an online video that incorporated neo-Nazi imagery.

Most New Right writers shy away from explicit racism and anti-Semitism. Some are more interested in foreign policy, while others focus on economics and trade. All of them, however, share one quality: They sound more like left-wing progressives than actual conservatives.

Consider Ramaswamy’s approach to the world. He wants to cut aid to America’s allies, old and new, and spend the money on domestic concerns. The Heritage Foundation made a similar argument in a television spot aired during the GOP debate that disingenuously shows images from the devastation in Lahaina, Hawaii, without mentioning Putin’s war crimes abroad. According to the Washington Free Beacon’s Alana Goodman, Ramaswamy wants to meet with Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks and a left-wing icon. He says he would free Assange and pardon Edward Snowden, the NSA leaker who currently resides in Russia.

On Twitter/X, Heritage Foundation president Kevin Roberts has posted approvingly of former Democratic congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard, an apologist for Vladimir Putin and Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. Tucker Carlson has also defended these war criminals. In *Tucker: The Biography*, the former Fox News star tells author Chadwick Moore that Venezuela’s socialist strongman Nicolás Maduro is a fan of his. Carlson comes across as more amused than appalled.

Now it’s true that fissures in American foreign policy cut across partisan lines. There are internationalists and isolationists in both parties. And it’s true that, before World War II, Republicans were known for their opposition to permanent alliances and to involvement in European affairs. But that was almost a century ago. Postwar conservatives have been known for their antagonism toward anti-American tyrants and their sympathy for U.S. international leadership, a strong defense, and military force.

Any individual conservative might oppose specific actions—in the Balkans, say, or in Iraq—without contesting American exceptionalism or America’s role as guarantor of international security. Not so the New Right, which seems to long for a repudiation of American power. Trump and Carlson equate U.S. foreign policy with Putin’s. Trump has said the greatest

**Commentary**
threat to America isn’t China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, nuclear proliferation, or global terrorism, but our very own “deep state.” The Heritage ad suggesting we are more concerned with Kyiv than Lahaina smacked of leftist Democrat George McGovern’s “Come home, America” slogan in 1972.

One’s attitude toward American foreign policy tends to reflect one’s view of America’s national condition. If you think America is a good and noble country, you are more likely to support international engagement. Conversely, if you think America is a clumsy or malevolent actor on the world stage, you are more likely to think there is something wrong with your countrymen. The New Right’s negative stance toward foreign intervention is in line with its apocalyptic view of the United States.

Hillsdale College’s Michael Anton, whose then-pseudonymous “Flight 93 Election” essay from 2016 was a New Right manifesto, has nary a kind word to say about his native land. “American carnage” doesn’t begin to describe his take. Everything is rotten, failed, disgusting. “The people are corrupt,” Anton writes in Up from Conservatism, in a passage that recalls the “Amerika” literature of the Vietnam-era left.

Also like the New Left, the New Right casts a critical eye on our ideals and values—the wellsprings of American activity abroad. Claremont Institute fellow Carson Holloway writes in Up from Conservatism that “propositional-nation conservatism,” inspired by Abraham Lincoln’s adherence to the equality clause of the Declaration of Independence, is “a source of political failure for the Right—and indeed, of the kind of failures that threaten the security of our civilization.”

The Claremont Institute where Holloway hangs his hat was established to promote the teachings of Professor Harry Jaffa, who believed that the equality clause—“we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”—was the most significant piece of writing since the Christian New Testament and that Lincoln was the greatest statesman in world history. Jaffa is not mentioned in Holloway’s essay or elsewhere in Up from Conservatism. But his nemesis, the author and presidential candidate Pat Buchanan, is cited approvingly several times.

This culture-war faction of the New Right is interested in restraining America abroad, restricting immigration, criticizing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and casting out the last vestiges of the Republican “establishment.” It’s eager to crack down on publicly funded universities, woke corporations, and Big Tech platforms.

But the culture-war faction has company. There is another group of New Right thinkers affiliated with the journal American Affairs and the think tank American Compass. These institutions are part of an effort to move the GOP toward greater state intervention in the economy. Readers of American Affairs will find paens to the Chinese authoritarian model, discussions of industrial policy, and jeremiads against Wall Street. Socialists and postmodernists such as the German Marxist Wolfgang Streeck and the Slovenian charlatan Slavoj Zizek mingle with up-and-coming Trumpist thinkers. The publication has the feel of left-wing theoretical journals from the 20th century—dreary, turgid, and gray. It might be more influential if it weren’t so recondite.

American Compass is livelier. Its leader, the feisty Oren Cass, went from Bain & Company, Harvard Law, and Mitt Romney’s presidential campaign to become the tribune of the working man. In his 2018 book, The Once and Future Worker, and more recently in the glossy publication Rebuilding American Capitalism: A Handbook for Conservative Policymakers, Cass urges conservatives to privilege politics over economics and pursue policies that, if all goes according to plan, will materially benefit the non-college-educated voters who have come to be the base of the GOP.

The emphasis that Cass puts on the value of work is laudable. Some of his proposals, such as opening non-college pathways to career development and lessening America’s dependence on China, are attractive. Others deserve close scrutiny. Put simply, why would voters worried about inflation react favorably to an economic nationalism that raises prices by increasing tariffs? Rebuilding American Capitalism calls for

Confusing, isn’t it, when movements lose their bearings. Freedom becomes tyranny, constitutionalism and the rule of law become passé, and America becomes the source of, not the solution to, the world’s ills.

Today’s GOP, like the candidates on the debate stage, can’t make up its mind, creating the space for opportunists like Vivek Ramaswamy to flourish.

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the elimination of the trade deficit but has little to say about the budget deficit. It would be a tragedy, for the working class most of all, if the GOP decides that the only stuff it wants to import are bad ideas from Europe and Asia.

Of the New Right groups, American Compass probably has the most pull inside the Beltway. It is not hard to see why. Cass offers a ready-made diagnosis of troubled communities, as well as a helpful menu of policy options, for ambitious Republicans eager to placate and someday inherit Donald Trump’s non-college-educated constituency. Senator J.D. Vance of Ohio is champing at the bit to claim Trump’s throne by harking back to the 1980s—combining Dick Gephardt’s industrial labor policy with Tom Harkin’s dovesh foreign policy.

Gephardt and Harkin were Midwestern Democrats, of course, both of whom ran for president in 1988. And the more closely one looks at the epigones of the New Right, the more they begin to resemble the left-wingers of that time: anti-institutional, hostile to expert opinion, skeptical of America abroad, and dirigiste at home. Little separates Vance—other than his Yale Law degree and fortune from venture capitalism—from Vietnam War hero and former Virginia senator Jim Webb, whose opposition to the 2003 Iraq War and concern with rising income inequality prompted him to leave the GOP and become a Democrat. Under the aegis of Trump, the tendency that Webb represented and the people he spoke for are finding their home in the GOP...minus the trappings of conservatism.

The former Commentary writer Sohrab Ahmari is a leading indicator of the New Right’s ultimate destination. Having helped launch the New Right with his 2019 attack on the conservative writer David French for failing to fight the culture war furiously enough, Ahmari went on to co-found Compact, a “radical online journal.” Lately he has said less about his conservative Catholicism and more about his radical politics. His latest book, Tyranny Inc., begins with a false equivalence between specific working conditions in America and general political conditions in China, Russia, and Iran.

Like progressive writers Barbara Ehrenreich and Thomas Frank, Ahmari alternates between human-interest reporting and denunciations of corporate greed. His arguments all run in the same direction: “The general tendency of Tyranny, Inc.,” Ahmari writes, “is the domination of working- and middle-class people by the owners of capital, the asset-less by the asset rich.” In his memoir From Fire, by Water, published when he was 34, Ahmari described his college-age Marxism. He’s relapsed.

Ahmari doesn’t go for subtlety. In his capable prose, the New Deal is without fault, and the liberal economics writer and Harvard professor John Kenneth Galbraith is a forgotten genius. What America needs is workers’ rights and Galbraith’s concept of “countervailing power,” with labor organizations and government regulators constraining business. Conservatives, Ahmari says, are beholden to the mistaken notions of the 16th president. “Lincoln’s quaint view of industry,” Ahmari writes, “blinded him to the injustices inherent in his free-labor ideal.” Take that, Abe!

Unsurprisingly, Ahmari has found an audience among the writers and editors of the New York Times, who have taken to tracking the minutiae of his career with an intensity they normally reserve for Beyoncé. A recent piece for the Times quotes Oren Cass saying that Tyranny, Inc. “bravely goes where few conservatives dare tread, to the ideologically fraught realm in which the market appears inherently coercive and capitalism appears in tension with economic freedom.” Perhaps one reason conservatives have not trod upon this ideologically fraught realm, where markets are coercive and freedom is just oppression under a different guise, is that it is the preserve of the left.

Confusing, isn’t it, when movements lose their bearings. Freedom becomes tyranny, constitutionalism and the rule of law become passé, and America becomes the source of, not the solution to, the world’s ills. Today’s GOP, like the candidates on the debate stage, can’t make up its mind, creating the space for opportunists like Vivek Ramaswamy to flourish.

We can expect the tics and eruptions of the New Right to spread if the Trump era endures. The clique is busy preparing for a second Trump term, or perhaps J.D. Vance’s or Josh Hawley’s first one. Its ambition is as far-reaching as its rhetoric. “Ruling requires taking responsibility for the good of your people and defending them against their enemies,” Arthur Milikh writes in the introduction to Up from Conservatism. “Ruling in this sense is inspiring, invigorating, and beautiful to behold. The New Right must become the party of beauty, vitality, strength, truth, high purpose, and fierceness.”

Good luck with that. It’s up to the rest of us to expose the New Right for what it truly is: ugly, pessimistic, base, weak toward America’s enemies, and, like its progressive twin, corrosive of the American tradition of liberty.
VISITING SOUTHERN New Jersey this summer, I kept seeing yard signs that read “Stop the Windmills—Save Our Coast.” The posters were rallying opposition to the massive Ocean Wind 1 power project 15 miles off the Jersey shore near Atlantic City. That constellation of 853-foot-high wind turbines is supposed to start construction any day now, although delays and financial uncertainties have hampered the project. Ocean Wind 1 is planned to be one of more than two dozen huge wind projects off the East Coast from South Carolina to Maine.

If it ever gets built.

Which it won’t if the residents of South Jersey have anything to say about it. According to a recent Monmouth University poll, support for offshore wind in the state is dropping fast. In 2019, only 15 percent of New Jersey residents opposed such projects. Today more than 40 percent say they’re against turbines off their beaches. They aren’t alone. In almost every part of the country where large wind farms have been proposed, you’ll see signs like the ones in South Jersey.

Wind power is the biggest component of the renewable-energy revolution championed by climate advocates and political progressives. And it’s growing fast. According to the Energy Information Administration (EIA), wind now provides more than 10 percent of total electricity generation in the U.S., up from about 2 percent in 2010. That growth is partly in response to decades of lavish subsidies from both states and the federal government. President Biden’s bipartisan infrastructure deal and Inflation Reduction Act further ramped up subsidies, and the White House has an array of programs to boost offshore projects. New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy has said he wants the Garden State to be “the nation’s offshore wind-energy leader.” Last year he signed an executive order committing the state to a target of 11,000 megawatts of offshore wind power by 2040.

Clearly, politicians and environmentalists love wind power. And so do the manufacturers, construction companies, labor unions, and others who tap into the subsidy pipeline. But apparently, few people want to live near wind turbines—even if they’re on the distant horizon. Energy analyst Robert Bryce tracks local opposition to wind and solar projects in his Renewable Rejection Database. Bryce reports that more than 400 communities have moved to block or restrict wind power to date. (Solar-power installations also attract opposition.) The resistance doesn’t come just from conservative, fossil-fuel-addicted NIMBYs. Communities are fighting wind projects even in deep blue Massachusetts and California. Often, local branches of the Sierra Club and other green groups lead the charge.

The opponents have a point. Wind turbines may be green in the sense that they make electricity without emitting carbon, but they are pretty rough on the local environment. For starters, the American Bird Conservancy estimates that wind turbines kill over 1 million birds each year. Wind farms also require enormous amounts of land, about 85 acres for each megawatt of power produced. New York City used to get 25 percent of its power from the now-shuttered Indian Point nuclear plant. That plant produced more than 2,000 MW of power on a site of 240 acres. That’s less than half a square mile of land (much of which is left wild). Replacing all that power with wind turbines
Because they are taken in by the promise of economic politicians support this financial drain on their citizens? By taxpayers and electricity consumers. Why do so many subsidies, he wrote. In the end, these subsidies are all funded the industry would likely not exist without myriad sub-
marine environment. In a blockbuster 2020 report, Man-
and then maintaining all that infrastructure in the harsh marine environment. Imagine the costs of transporting workers and materials to worksites in the open ocean, constructing towers almost three times the height of the Statue of Liberty, and then maintaining all that infrastructure in the harsh marine environment.

Both the economic and environmental problems of wind are amplified when turbines are located offshore. Imagine the costs of transporting workers and materials to worksites in the open ocean, constructing towers almost three times the height of the Statue of Liberty, and then maintaining all that infrastructure in the harsh marine environment.

The low energy density of wind also means that it takes a huge quantity of materials to produce each megawatt of power. A land-based turbine requires as much as 1,000 tons of concrete and 165 tons of steel (materials that take huge amounts of energy to manufacture). The turbine blades are crafted from exotic (and non-recyclable) blends of fiber and resins. And the generators require neodymium and other rare-earth metals (which are mostly mined in regions with sketchy environmental protections). After all that investment in energy, materials and labor, the typical turbine will last only 20 years.

By the same token, the economic benefits of wind power are far murkier than backers insist. Under optimal conditions, wind turbines produce very inexpensive power. That's great. Wind can make economic sense in areas like Texas and Oklahoma where the wind comes sweeping down the plains on a regular basis. But according to the EIA, most U.S. wind farms produce meaningful amounts of power only about a third of the time. The intermittency of wind power (and solar too, of course) is not just a practical challenge, but a financial one. It means power companies must dramatically overbuild energy-producing capacity just to make sure they have enough juice when wind or solar power falters. Usually they turn to gas-fired power plants to pick up the slack. Building all this extra capacity costs money, but those costs are often ignored when renewable backers extoll wind's low cost per kilowatt hour.

Both the economic and environmental problems of wind are amplified when turbines are located offshore. Imagine the costs of transporting workers and materials to worksites in the open ocean, constructing towers almost three times the height of the Statue of Liberty, and then maintaining all that infrastructure in the harsh marine environment. Backers of offshore wind typically produce studies showing how their projects will produce billions in economic benefits. “In reality,” Lesser writes, “the money is transferred from ratepayers and taxpayers to developers—there is no improvement in overall wellbeing.”

And then there are the whales. In January, a dead humpback whale washed up on the beach in Brigantine, New Jersey. Marine scientists said it “suffered blunt trauma injuries consistent with those from a vessel strike.” It was just one of about two dozen dead whales that washed ashore in the Northeast this past winter. Some experts tied the uptick in whale deaths to the surge in pre-construction boat traffic at offshore wind sites up and down the coast. Others disagreed. The media, always reluctant to question the renewable juggernaut, quickly endorsed the latter view. “What’s killing whales off the Northeast coast?” asked CNN. “It’s not wind farm projects, experts say.” Once construction begins in earnest, of course, the potential impact on whales and other marine species will be exponentially higher.

But even when playing with government-subsidized chips, offshore wind development remains a gamble. In a stunning pre–Labor Day call with investors, Orsted, the Danish wind-power giant behind Ocean Wind 1, announced it would be delaying construction on that project and “reconfiguring”... two other offshore ventures due to financial pressures. One key problem, the AP reported, is the “failure so far to garner enough tax credits from the federal government.” An Orsted executive said the company had even considered walking away from the project but had decided to continue, at least “as it stands today.” Earlier this year, Governor Murphy signed a bill giving Orsted a new tax break that critics said could add up to nearly $1 billion. The clear implication of Orsted’s recent announcement was that more such handouts might be required to keep the project afloat.

New York and other Eastern Seaboard states are vying with New Jersey in the effort to ride the supposed offshore-energy boom. Other wind developers are already ratcheting up their demands for bigger subsidies as well. And I expect we’ll be seeing more yard signs demanding that we “Stop the Windmills!”

Commentary
I n 2021, the New York Post reported on the many private email addresses then–Vice President Joe Biden had used to correspond with his son Hunter Biden, possibly to evade government transparency laws. The story quickly died. In 2023, the Southeastern Legal Foundation, which had previously filed a FOIA request for documents related to the pseudonymous emails and was told that more than 5,000 existed in the federal records, sued the National Archives and Record Administration because that government agency has delayed their release.

The Post and other right-leaning outlets reported the news and noted its importance to the ongoing investigation by the U.S. House Oversight Committee into Hunter Biden’s foreign business activities. But few mainstream outlets picked up the story. Those that did, such as Time, downplayed the news by uncritically repeating the administration’s claim that efforts by senior government officials to dodge public-transparency laws are commonplace: “Biden was following a common practice among senior government officials hoping to thwart hackers, as well as prevent spammers from guessing their address and clogging their inbox, according to a White House official.”

You’d think the possible effort by the former vice president and current president to evade transparency laws and conduct business behind the shield of pseudonymous email addresses would be a story worth reporting out—rather than simply regurgitating an official’s questionable claim that Biden was engaging in healthy spam-prevention techniques. But at least Time covered the story; the New York Times and the Washington Post did not. Most mainstream outlets thus far have gone along with the administration’s inconsistent narrative about Joe Biden’s involvement in his son’s business interests.

The response to the pseudonymous emails is part of a pattern of mainstream media behavior regarding President Biden. The press corps under Biden has demonstrated an astonishing unwillingness to follow up on stories, ask hard-hitting questions, or hold the administration to the same standards it has applied to previous presidents of either party.

For example, none of the perennial complaints that dogged previous presidents about their availability for press conferences and interviews have been aimed at Biden, even though Biden has granted the fewest interviews of any president since Ronald Reagan.

In June 2022, Politico acknowledged, “Joe Biden doesn’t do many off-the-record chats with reporters,” but described the traveling White House press corps as “surprised and intrigued,” like guests at their own birthday party, when Biden deigned to stop by the Air Force One press section during a trip. Alas, he “wasn’t just there to field questions.” Rather, “he used much of his time with reporters to criticize the quality and
tenor of press coverage about his administration,” since Biden and his family feel that “he is not receiving the kind of generally more positive coverage they believe he deserves.”

When Biden does sit down for interviews, it is often with softball celebrity hosts or social-media influencers like YouTube boy-beauty blogger Manny MUA or actress Drew Barrymore, who ask hard-hitting questions about what gifts Biden likes to give to his wife. The New York Times’ coverage of Biden’s unavailability has been sparse and remarkably sanguine. One such story made sure to mention that “Mr. Biden has not accused the news media of being ‘the enemy of the people,’ as his predecessor did during four years in which news organizations documented thousands of lies by Mr. Trump.”

Indeed, President Biden’s questionable interpretations of the truth are not called lies at all, despite the conscious decision of news outlets to start using the word “lie” to describe untruths spoken by Donald Trump during his presidency. A recent article by Washington Post fact checker Glenn Kessler put it thus: “Biden loves to retell certain stories. Some aren’t credible.” Nor were his lies noted by New York Times chief White House correspondent Peter Baker, who endorsed Kessler’s piece on social media: “As president, Biden has continued a tradition of embellishing his personal tales in ways that cannot be verified or are directly refuted by contemporaneous accounts.”

Part of the challenge of verifying Biden’s accounts is the White House’s practice of pre-screening reporters and refusing admission to many, often for weeks at a time and even during large White House press events. The practice became so blatant that in June 2022, 73 reporters signed a letter to the White House demanding it end. Although the administration briefly relented, it went back to the practice of pre-screening, and the press corps has been predictably docile in accepting its fate.

Nor has the press corps produced a journalist interested in exploring what Biden does when he spends time at the beach in Delaware or on other personal trips or vacations away from the White House. These trips, according to recent calculations, represent approximately 40 percent of his presidency. Even if one accepts the administration’s claim that he is “working” while at the beach, no journalist has demanded Biden be transparent about what that work is or who he is seeing. There are no visitor logs kept for either of Biden’s Delaware homes, so the public has no way of knowing what Biden is doing or whom he is seeing when he is supposedly working.

Why aren’t journalists more curious and skeptical about the most powerful man on the planet?

An early clue to the answer came in a December 2021 Washington Post column by Dana Milbank. In it, Milbank claimed, preposterously, “The media treats Biden as badly—or worse—than Trump.” Some of Milbank’s examples of this “unrelentingly negative” coverage of Biden included headlines from Politico such as “White House Braces for a Bad CBO Score” and “Biden Dithers.”

Finally, Milbank signaled his real intention: Justifying anyone (in this case, Biden) who will serve as a dam against the rising tide of Trumpism. “We need a skeptical, independent press,” Milbank conceded. “But how about being partisans for democracy? The country is in an existential struggle between self-governance and an authoritarian alternative. And we in the news media, collectively, have given equal, if not slightly more favorable, treatment to the authoritarians.”

In an existential crisis, you see, normal rules don’t apply, and journalists can feel not merely competent but courageous in serving up watered-down versions of administration spin. It’s also why, when journalists are confronted with evidence of their own stubborn incuriosity, they react defensively.

During a recent interview on Comedy Cellar owner Noam Dworman’s podcast, Washington Post reporter Philip Bump was reduced to spluttering outrage when he was asked to respond to the possibility that some of the evidence gathered thus far in the Hunter case pointed to the possibility of corruption linked to Joe’s time as vice president.

“I’m just, I’m gonna lose my mind. I’m gonna lose my mind,” Bump said. Bump repeatedly demanded that Dworman present his evidence, and when Dworman did just that, Bump was dismissive: “You’ve offered no evidence beyond your parsing. . . . This conversation is silly!” When Dworman asked whether any reporter had asked Hunter’s adult daughter what Hunter had meant when he texted her that he had had to give half of his income to Joe Biden, Bump replied, “I don’t know. I don’t know!” Dworman politely followed up: “Don’t you think somebody should ask her?” Bump replied: “Like I just said that I don’t know and that I don’t [know] what to make of it so I have nothing to say about it. What do you want me to say?” Then he stormed out of Dworman’s club.

“President Biden has brought honesty and integrity back to the Oval Office,” deputy White House press secretary Andrew Bates told Glenn Kessler. “Like he promised, he gives the American people the truth right from the shoulder.” You can quote him on that. Kessler did, just as he and others seem to do the administration’s bidding every day. ❯
TRIKING ARCHEOLOGICAL discoveries are a constant in Israel, but they can still occasionally inspire wonder. That is the case with the uncovering of a weapons cache from the second century, placed in the Judean desert by Jewish soldiers under the command of Simon bar Kosiba, better known as Bar Kochba, or “son of the star.” He led a rebellion against the Roman emperor Hadrian in the 130s C.E. The Jerusalem Post reports:

An ancient cache of Roman weaponry including four spatha swords and a javelin head was found in a hidden chamber inside a cave at Israel’s Ein Gedi Nature Reserve, in the Judean desert. “To find one sword like this is rare, so four? It’s a dream come true,” the researchers noted. “We couldn’t believe our eyes.”

The weapons cache was most likely hidden by Jewish rebels some 1,900 years ago, the authority said, after being seized from Roman forces. One of the IAA staff said it was possible that they would detect DNA on the swords that would provide even more incredible details.

It is indeed incredible, but it must be said it is not at all the most incredible discovery from the Bar Kochba period; or, rather, that these Roman swords can be truly appreciated only when considered in tandem with a very different find made in Israel many decades ago.

Let us set the historical stage. The emperor Hadrian reigned around half a century after the Second Temple was destroyed. While Jerusalem had lain in ruins for decades, it was still known as a Jewish city. Hadrian sought to transform it into a Roman one, Aelia Capitolina, with a center of pagan worship where the Temple had once resplendently stood, from which Jews would be forever banned. This is why the Talmud reserves a hatred for Hadrian that it did not even express toward his predecessors Titus and Vespasian, under whom the Temple had been destroyed. The Temple was razed because the Jews had rebelled against Rome’s political authority. For Hadrian, this was not enough; the sacred city of the Jews had to be de-Judaized forever.

This sparked the most famous failed military endeavor in Jewish history. The rebellion was supported, according to the Talmud, by Rabbi Akiva, the greatest sage of his era, who vested messianic hope in Bar Kochba, fueled by a faith that God would not allow such a desecration of His city. We can well understand his religious logic; after all, a miraculous salvation had come under the Maccabees three centuries earlier, when Antiochus had sought to Hellenize Jerusalem.

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Yet salvation and victory did not come. Bar Kochba did not prove to be the messiah of Rabbi Akiva’s hopes, and the sage himself was executed, tortured to death, with the words of the Shema on his lips.

Eighteen centuries later, in 1961, excavators near Beersheba discovered a cavern containing, as the archaeologist Yigael Yadin described it, a “collection of baskets overflowing with human skulls, and layers of large mats covering human bones.” These were “the remains of Bar Kokhba’s fighters,” Yadin conjectures, who had died “from famine or thirst, with Roman soldiers besieging them from above.”

But that was not all that Yadin found. The cavern contained letters from Bar Kokhba himself, including one written in advance of the Sukkot holiday, referencing the ritual of waving a lulav, a palm frond:

Shimon to Yehudah, son of Menasheh, at Qiyyat Arabayah—I have delivered to you two donkeys [in order] that you dispatch along with them two men to Yehonathan, son of Ba’y’an, and to Mesabalah [in order] that they pack up and deliver to the camp, to you, palm branches and citrons. And you are to send additional persons from your place and let them bring you myrtle branches and willows. And prepare them, and deliver them to the camp, because the population is large. Fare well!

In the midst of war against the mightiest empire on earth, Bar Kokhba desperately sought for his army to observe the rituals of Sukkot. The date palm was a supreme agricultural symbol of Judea. That is why it is wielded on the biblical harvest holiday and why Vespasian had minted coins with the same tree and the triumphant words Judea Capta (“Judea has been captured”). The request for lulavim is made more poignant when we realize that in rabbinic thought, the ramrod palm branch represents the spine. Above all, it reminds us, as Rabbi Norman Lamm reflected, that “to be a Jew, to be possessed of this sublime historic faith...requires, above all else, the power, the moral strength, the ethical might, and the undaunted conviction that are symbolized by the unbending backbone, the lulav.”

Today, if one were to visit Jerusalem during the Sukkot, one would see a city with Jews holding lulavim aloft, reciting the very same psalms that were once uttered by Rabbi Akiva and Bar Kokhba’s men, seamlessly linking past and present. The lulav letter thus reflects the unique nature of Jewish life. The Israeli scholar and diplomat Yaakov Herzog once conjectured that were most peoples to meet figures from their ancient past, they would find that their faith and culture had so profoundly changed that they would have little in common with the individuals from antiquity; these ancients would be seen as “great historical figures, but not necessarily part of the daily experience of the people among whom they had lived.” Yet were Rabbi Akiva to return, “Jews would speak to him, question him about his attitude towards the Bar Kokhba war, and what he thought about the destruction of the Temple. They would talk to him about the nature of the Jewish people, its dialogue with the God of Israel, and with the nations of the world, the historical experience, continuity and the future—as though he had never been away.”

Yadin reports that in standing among the skeletons of the Jewish soldiers, and finding the letter of Bar Kokhba, awe settled over his cohort:

As we searched amid the ruins of the Roman camp, it occurred to us that we, who were unearthing the remains of the warriors of the cave in the cliffside below, were operating from a camp which had been set up by members of the Israel Defense Forces near the site of the old Roman camp. Israel’s soldiers of today were helping to restore to life, as it were, their comrades-at-arms of eighteen hundred years ago. The symbolism of it all was something which not even the most hardened cynic could gainsay.

With us in the Roman camp ruins then was a Jewish visitor from abroad. As he stood on the precipice, observing the scene, he blurted the old Hebrew formula: “Am Yisrael hai!” (“The Jewish people lives!”) He expressed what all of us felt.

They were right to be in awe, as it is indeed awe-inspiring to hold a Roman sword once wielded by fighters for Judean freedom. But it’s even more inspiring to ponder the fact that these weapons, once wielded by Hadrianic legions thought to be all but invincible, now remind us of an empire long gone, even as the world still has plenty of ideological heirs of Hadrians, who despise the Jewishness of Jerusalem. Yet the ultimate vindication of Rabbi Akiva is to be found in the countless lulavim that will adorn Jerusalem this year, embodying a living, vibrant Judaism that holds aloft the spiritual symbol of the Jewish spine, and therefore of Jewish endurance. Thus does this new archeological discovery, several weeks before Sukkot, remind us of the wonder of our age: The lulav has outlasted the Roman sword. 

Commentary
ONE: THE REVERSE-IMAGE PARTIES

THOSE OF US who follow politics in granular detail view the woof and warp of our daily battles as though we’re looking at a topological map, jagged and pocked with crevices we’re in danger of falling into at any moment. But what if we’re just spooking ourselves? What if the road to the future is actually a flat smooth surface, just like the two-dimensional map your teacher pulled down like a movie screen in front of you and

John Podhoretz is the editor of Commentary.

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your classmates back in the old days?

Consider. The drama that has enveloped the two leading candidates for president is nothing less than operatic. One has been indicted in four separate criminal cases, been sued in civil court for tax fraud, and been found liable for raping a woman more than a quarter century ago (and then for defaming her after the verdict). The other has shown consistent signs of cognitive decline, spends more than 40 percent of his time away from the White House at a vacation home where we have no idea what he does all day, and has become progressively implicated in criminal matters involving his son in past years (some of which took place, with his undeniable participation, during his vice presidency). And yet the race between them has been remarkably static—and basically tied nationally.

On January 1, 2023, Joe Biden led by six-tenths of a percentage point in the RealClearPolitics average, 44.8 to Donald Trump’s 44.2. On April 1, they were tied at 43. On June 1, Trump led, also by six-tenths of a single point, 44.6 to 44. On August 1, Biden zoomed into a crushing lead of nine-tenths of 1 percent, 44.9 to 44. But by September 7, Biden was up only four-tenths of a point, at 44.5 and Trump at 44.1. So all the melodrama—the mugshot for Trump, the way the sweetheart plea deal for Biden’s son blew up in a Delaware courtroom, the rape finding, the sight of Biden wandering out in the middle of a Medal of Honor ceremony over which he was presiding—has had no effect. If American politics is opera, it’s not Verdi. It’s Philip Glass—two notes played, over and over again, forever.

What helps these two men hurts them as well, and vice versa. Take Trump. Pundits and partisans alike agree that Trump’s indictments have helped him achieve overwhelming dominance in the Republican primary field. His legal woes provide ballast for the argument that he is being pursued relentlessly and unjustly by the very people whose influence he wishes to counter and eliminate. But at the same time, his troubles have surely injured him with those who are not susceptible to his argument. Fifty-six percent of Americans disapprove of him and his personal conduct. Of course they do. They should.

And Biden? His disapproval number is almost exactly the same as Trump’s, at 55.6 percent. However, the president’s current political condition is the reverse image of what is happening with Trump and the GOP. Think of it. Trump leads his closest Republican rival in the RCP poll average by 38.5 percent. Meanwhile, a staggering percentage of Democrats—seven out of every 10, every time they’re asked now—tell pollsters they want someone other than Biden to be their party’s nominee in 2024. Of course they do. And they should, too.

They and we have daily evidence of Biden’s infirmities. The mainstream press may downplay or soft-pedal the worrisome nature of Biden’s condition, but they cannot blind the public to what it sees. And yet no serious Democratic rival is willing to take the plunge and challenge the president for their party’s nomination. In point of fact, Biden’s obvious liabilities are not luring ambitious men and women to grab at the great brass ring. If anything, they are hindering those ambitions.

To take the nomination from Biden—either by beating him outright or by convincing him through a popular upset bid to decline to run for reelection, as Lyndon Johnson did in 1968—a Democrat would have to talk about the president’s health and his problematic son. And if that rival’s effort were to fail and Biden were then to stand in the general election, that rival’s negative words about Biden would be used as a weapon in hundreds of millions of dollars of Republican advertising leading up to the election. To sum up: A Democrat can’t run against Biden because it is too dangerous in the general election for any Democrat to make a case against Biden’s weakness if the president isn’t going to step aside or be pushed aside.

So here we are. Two extraordinarily unpopular men whose reputations have been called into question on a daily basis all year are on what appear to be separate glide paths to their nominations in the first showdown between a president and a former president since the year 1912 and the first presidential rematch since 1956.

Ever since Trump’s rise it has become a commonplace for people who follow politics to refer to the dangerous instability of our politics, especially considering Trump’s flaunting of law and custom on the one hand and Biden’s mental decline on the other. That conventional wisdom has proved to be a complete misreading of the American political mood. Things aren’t
Practically every major Republican politician would clearly prefer that Trump be gone. But those politicians, even the ones running against Trump, do not dare to say it.

The result of uniformity among Democrats or Republicans. There is no such uniformity. To wit: A clear majority of Republican voters want Trump. But the overwhelming majority of members of the Republican elite—politicians and major donors and policy mavens—do not. Fox News has done everything it can to focus positive attention on Ron DeSantis. The Super PACs supporting Republican candidates in the race against Trump have raised an astounding $200 million. Practically every major Republican politician would clearly prefer that Trump be gone. But those politicians, even the ones running against Trump, do not dare to say it. And those 200 million dollars might as well have been set on fire for all the good they’ve done the cause of moving the GOP beyond Trump.

Here, once again, we see the two parties as though they are mirror images. Democratic voters do not want Biden. But Democratic elites apparently do. The media are continuing to run a prevent defense for Biden. They are doing everything they can to keep the astonishing developments in the Hunter Biden story from becoming a major scandal—and highlighting alarming footage of Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell’s two public moments of incapacity while consigning to Twitter/X the more alarming daily images of Joe Biden wandering off stages and trailing off as he speaks.

Republican voters consume media that have made them uncommonly literate in the life and times and laptop and business dealings of Hunter Biden, and they know enough about Donald Trump’s troubles to follow him in cursing the names of DAs Alvin Bragg, Fani Willis, and special prosecutor Jack Smith. Democratic voters have dined for eight years on the ambrosia of outrage surrounding the activities of Donald Trump and seem to have an inexhaustible appetite for having their outrage reaffirmed on a daily basis. They, too, know Willis and Bragg and Smith, and are probably very fond of them. But it’s doubtful they could name either the Hunter Biden special prosecutor (David Weiss) or the judge in the Hunter case (Maryellen Norieka). Even more striking, if you’d ask them who Tony Bobulinski and Devon Archer are, or who Gary Shapley and Joseph Ziegler are, they would likely have no idea. **

Another commonplace in current American politics is to say that left and right both live in bubbles that keep the astonishing developments in the Hunter Biden story from becoming a major scandal—and highlighting alarming footage of Jack Smith. Democratic voters have dined for eight years on the ambrosia of outrage surrounding the activities of Donald Trump and seem to have an inexhaustible appetite for having their outrage reaffirmed on a daily basis. They, too, know Willis and Bragg and Smith, and are probably very fond of them. But it’s doubtful they could name either the Hunter Biden special prosecutor (David Weiss) or the judge in the Hunter case (Maryellen Norieka). Even more striking, if you’d ask them who Tony Bobulinski and Devon Archer are, or who Gary Shapley and Joseph Ziegler are, they would likely have no idea.**

Another commonplace in current American politics is to say that left and right both live in bubbles that keep them unaware of the news of the other. But that’s not quite right. The right is fully aware of everything that’s being thrown at Donald Trump and others in their ambit. There is no real way for them to live unaware with the mainstream media and pop culture in the hands of liberals and leftists. But awareness does
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not equal acceptance. The right no longer cares about the left’s cases against Trump. In fact, any allegation tossed at Trump is viewed as dismissible because of the source.

Something a little different is happening on the Democratic side of the ledger. Liberal and leftist elites can completely isolate themselves from conservative media investigations into Hunter Biden or Joe’s own cognitive difficulties, because of the way they consume news and information. Indeed, since they are also in charge of the way that news and information come out, they are, in effect, blinding themselves to reality.

These Democratic lions do not really understand how significant the president’s liabilities might be. For their part, Republican “thought leaders” have tried to do something to deal with the threat of a Trump presidency, even if their efforts have been halting and unsure and confused. But Democratic thought leaders look at Biden and see a man who beat Trump once, whose governing agenda they really like, and whose vice president they have come to disdain. Since they feel no pain from inflation, they clearly have no feel for fellow Democrats less well-heeled than they whose grocery bills are 10 percent higher this year than last and for whom used-car prices and travel expenses have skyrocketed.

So our fun-house mirror shows elites in both parties out of touch with the party’s grassroots normal people, but for wildly different reasons. Rank-and-file Democrats are expressing an entirely realistic concern about the choice that is being imposed on them from above, while rank-and-file Republicans are more enthusiastic about Trump than they have ever been and are openly resisting efforts to provide them with a choice come primary season.

TWO:
THE REVERSE-IMAGE RESPONSES

The next year is going to see more unprecedented political and legal news. Donald Trump and his company will be tried in a New York civil court beginning in January, and soon after he will face criminal proceedings in matters relating to January 6 (in D.C.) and the classified documents he is accused of having handled unlawfully (in Florida) in the spring. There may or may not be a trial in Georgia before Election Day, but whatever.

At the same time, Joe Biden will not be getting any younger. He will only get older, even as the demands on his time and attentiveness both as president and as candidate metastasize. Hunter Biden is, we hear, likely to be indicted on a felony gun charge, and who knows what might follow from that; his behavior and the behavior of his father will continue to be a subject of intense focus from the House Oversight Committee.

But ask yourself: Will any of that change anything in any direction as we look at 2024 from the 2023 vantage point?

Unless the cases against Trump feature smoking-gun revelations, they are—shocking though this may seem, up to and including a felony conviction—unlikely to affect his bid for the nomination. And if Trump is there in the general election, Biden will have a floor under him through which he will probably not fall simply because he will be the only way to stop Trump.

The two parties and their associated soft-money organizations will spend a billion dollars or more, and the “earned media” (the free coverage of the two candidates and campaigns) will be incalculably large. But it seems plausible that none of it will matter. The likeliest scenario at this present moment is that Trump and Biden will go into Election Day effectively tied.

Which way will the scale tilt? Trump has signaled he will no longer insist, as he did in a particularly psychotic fashion in 2020, that his voters cast their ballots on Election Day alone, which should help Republican turnout modestly. That is a necessary adjustment toward basic reality, since his team knows that the Democratic turnout modestly. That is a necessary adjustment toward basic reality, since his team knows that the swing states of 2016 and 2020—Georgia, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Arizona—have all moved slightly in a Democratic Party direction in each of the past three elections. So Trump will need to harvest every vote he possibly can if he is to have a shot at the Electoral College.

If I’m right about this, and things remain as they have been, Democrats and liberals are going to get increasingly unnerved as the next 13 months progress. They have done everything they can to drum Trump out of public and political life, and their efforts have had the paradoxical effect of helping keep him at the red-hot center.

The lesson should be apparent by now, after the indictments and the findings and the January 6 hearings and whatever: Stop trying to use whatever means are at hand to eject your rival. Instead, take the mote out of your own eye. Change the trajectory by changing the dynamic in a way you can control. Which is to say, do whatever is necessary…to get Joe Biden out of the race. Convene a cabal of leading Democrats to visit him, praise him for his salvation of the country, promise him a spot on Mount Rushmore—in exchange for his retirement in sufficient time to allow for the Democratic contest that the party’s voters seem to crave.
That’s a long shot, though it shouldn’t be. More plausible is that Democratic leaders will continue to seek novel and untried means to deny Trump the presidency. The one that seems to have struck a chord recently isn’t even one they originated; it comes from conservative legal scholars.

It’s worth remembering that conservative legal scholars are as capable of sophistry as liberal legal scholars. Like Talmudists, they often advocate positions simply because those positions are interesting. The proper response to a 118-page law review article arguing that Trump’s violation of the 14th amendment ban on insurrectionists in American politics is so obvious no one even need prove he is an insurrectionist and he can simply be removed from ballots even without white-out is to collapse into a heap of disbelieving laughter. There is no such thing as a “self-executing” provision of anything in American public life. Even something as plain as the language in the Constitution forbidding anyone from being president who was born on foreign soil hasn’t proved to be self-executing; if it were, Ted Cruz (born in Canada) wouldn’t have run for the office in 2016.*

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Three initial feints in this direction—arguments that Trump’s name be ruled ineligible for a presidential ballot—hit courts in September. A Florida judge dismissed one on the grounds that the plaintiffs did not have standing to sue, and I think we can expect the same result in Colorado and Minnesota.

But there is a real danger that this argument will seize the imaginations of other ambitious elected Democrats in the course of 2024, especially if the race remains a jump ball. The intoxicating possibility of becoming instantly world-famous and a hero working to save democracy might be just the thing to seduce, say, the secretary of the commonwealth in the swing state of Pennsylvania. Following the logic of the factitious law-review article, he might declare his action self-executing and not even bother involving the courts.

This sounds like an extreme scenario, but is it really? It should be out of bounds because if some Democrats actually want to see what a genuine insurrection looks like, to see the world burn Joker-like, they could get their wish. This would appear to be, and would in fact be, an effort to fix a national election for America’s own good, to burn down the “it takes a village” in order to save it.

If that doesn’t happen, something else might. But if nothing happens, and the election is a jump ball, and the jump ball goes to Trump, I suspect the months leading up to the inauguration in 2025 might make January 6 look like a hootenanny.

Right now, we are not heading anywhere good.

* Cruz’s mother is a U.S. citizen. But had he actually won the party’s nomination, there would have been a major hoo-ha about the place of his birth.
Criminals and Their Apologists
From tough on crime to tough on victims
By Christine Rosen

IN MAY 2023, in his inaugural address as mayor of Chicago, Brandon Johnson said, “The tears of Adam Toledo’s parents are made of the same sorrow as those of Officer Preston’s parents.”

Johnson was referring to the deaths of Chicago police officer Areanah Preston—killed in cold blood by a group of violent young criminals—and Adam Toledo, who was fleeing police at two in the morning after he and a companion were caught firing guns at passing cars. Officer Preston was murdered while returning home after a long shift spent protecting the people of Chicago. Toledo had an illegal gun in his possession and was killed while ignoring a police officer’s commands to stop.

Not that long ago, reasonable people would have seen Mayor Johnson’s efforts at moral equivalence as despicable—and Johnson would likely have known it and would have stopped short of saying what he said. Today, such statements are commonplace, even among public officials charged with upholding the law and protecting the public, local and federal prosecutors most notably. Our adversarial justice system is meant to ensure a balance of interests. Prosecutors build a case to seek justice for victims; defense lawyers protect the rights of the accused. Of late, however, progressive prosecutors have upended that balanced system of justice in favor of embracing the notion that both the perpetrators of crime and the people upon whom they prey are all equally victims.

As California’s Alameda County District Attorney Pamela Price told a local CBS News reporter, “often what studies have shown—and it’s true in Alameda

Christine Rosen is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

Commentary

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As victimhood expands to incorporate new groups of protected people, not all of whom deserve the status of victim, the moral weight of victimhood has been diluted.

County—many times people who are perpetrators or labeled as perpetrators were actually victims.” Price recently gave an 18-year-old linked to three murders a plea deal that would have had him serve only a handful of years in juvenile detention due to the fact that the killings had been committed when he was younger—even though a judge urged that he be tried as an adult given his “extensive and violent criminal history in multiple jurisdictions.” A leaked memo revealed that Price had told prosecutors in her office to seek probation rather than jail time for most crimes, including violent felonies.

Conscientious prosecutors who have found themselves working under these new approaches are fleeing jobs in departments where DAs like Price have failed to pursue justice for victims. Danielle Hilton, who had been a prosecutor in Alameda County for almost 30 years, put it starkly in her resignation letter: “Victims deserve better.” As she wrote to Price, “I have spent my career picking up the pieces and gathering the fragments of lives shattered by violence. I encourage you to look at crime scene and autopsy photos, meet the victims of the robberies, sexual assaults, home burglaries and other crimes within the county. It is their voices you were elected to empower.”

In May 2023, another long-time Alameda County prosecutor, Assistant DA Butch Ford, also resigned, citing Price’s unwillingness to do her job—as well as the fact that when she arrived, she “demoted almost every Caucasian male in the office and stated, ‘the Blacks are taking over.’” Ford, like his colleague, told Price, “You have abandoned the victims of crime in this county.” Price’s policies, he said, “have led to violent offenders celebrating the lack of consequences in Alameda County.”

In the decades after Warren was sworn in as chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1953, he helped launch a revolution in criminal procedure, most notably with regard to the validity of evidence gathered in an unconstitutional search (Mapp v. Ohio, 1961), the obligation to provide counsel to defendants (Gideon v. Wainwright, 1963), and law enforcement’s obligation to inform those under arrest of their rights (Miranda v. Arizona, 1966), among many other cases. The Court effectively tilted the balance in criminal law toward a focus on the rights of the accused. Although wildly unpopular among Americans at the time, such rights are now largely embraced by the public and even by most conservative jurists.

In the decades that followed, in popular culture, particularly on television, the new rights guaranteed pending with no safety net to handle more criminals on the streets, shorter parole periods, lower sentences for repeat offenders . . . overuse of diversion programs, intentionally not pursuing prosecutions for crimes lawfully on the books.” These and other such notions have upended the foundations of the adversarial justice system. “Once we decide that it’s worth risking citizens’ lives to have a little social experiment,” Poje wrote, “that balance is lost.”

The recent effort to sideline the needs of victims in favor of emphasizing the plight of criminals is part of a broader change that began decades ago. I’m speaking of the flourishing of a victimology culture that confers moral and social status on anyone claiming victimhood. As Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning have argued in their 2018 book, The Rise of Victimhood Culture, a victimhood arms race has broken out in which individual behavior is subsumed beneath claims that one has been wronged—all to achieve higher moral status and escape personal responsibility. This culture has warped our understanding of what a victim really is. As victimhood expands to incorporate new groups and classes of protected people, not all of whom deserve the status of victim, the moral weight of victimhood has been diluted—and with it, society’s obligations to seek justice for real victims.

How did we get here? The story arguably begins with the work of another former Alameda County district attorney: Earl Warren.

In May, Cook County prosecutor Jason Poje wrote an outraged letter of resignation from his position as assistant state’s attorney in Illinois. “The simple fact is that this State and County have set themselves on a course to disaster,” the letter said. Poje noted that communities have been endangered by policies such as “bond reform designed to make sure no one stays in jail while their cases are
Even as tough-on-crime measures took hold, the idea that blame and responsibility for criminal behavior should be shared by society never fully receded.

by the Supreme Court became standard. When then-Chief Justice William Rehnquist upheld *Miranda* rights in a 2000 decision, he noted how the reading of rights to suspects had become ubiquitous on network-television crime shows. As *Broadcasting & Cable Magazine* editorialized at the time, “next to the Pledge of Allegiance, the *Miranda* rights may be the most familiar common litany of the baby boomer generation, thanks to TV.”

Similarly, advocates for a rehabilitative model of criminal justice (as opposed to deterrence and incarceration) gained new support during those years for the idea that crime was largely an expression of environmental factors such as poverty—thus downplaying personal responsibility and arguing that imprisonment should be a tool of last resort. The Prisoner Rehabilitation Act of 1965, for example, granted federal prisoners broader rights to furloughs and work-release programs and created halfway houses placing newly released inmates in communities. In 1963, the infamous Alcatraz prison was shuttered, a symbol of an earlier, harsher age of incarceration.

Then came the social upheaval of the 1960s counterculture, with its mistrust of authority (especially the police), increased drug use, and the breakdown of traditional families. All of this undermined existing law-enforcement efforts. Crime rose precipitously, particularly in large cities, and by the 1970s a backlash against soft-on-crime policies was underway. It received a significant boost from Robert Martinson’s 1974 report, “What Works? Questions and Answers About Prison Reform.” Summarizing his findings in the *Public Interest*, Martinson offered a tough verdict: “With few and isolated exceptions, the rehabilitative efforts that have been reported so far have had no appreciable effect on recidivism.” Crime was rising because the policies that claimed to change criminal behavior had failed to do so. As Martinson’s report concluded about the rehabilitative approach: “Nothing works.”

Another part of the backlash against soft-on-crime policies was much-needed attention finally given to victims. States passed laws allowing victims to read victim-impact statements during sentencing procedures, for example, and statutes such as New York’s 1978 “Son of Sam” law attempted to prevent criminals from profiting from their crimes. Congress passed a federal Crime Victims’ Rights Act in 1984 as well as a Victims’ Rights and Restitution Act, and most large cities and states established crime-victim compensation funds. Following along the same backlash pattern, the 1980s and 1990s saw tougher sentencing and “three-strikes” laws, supported by majorities of the public.

Yet even as tough-on-crime measures took hold, the idea that blame and responsibility for criminal behavior should be shared by society never fully receded, particularly among legal scholars and decarceration activists. Poverty, addiction, chaotic neighborhoods, lack of resources, mental-health issues—all the things once regularly and correctly cited as “risk factors” for criminal behavior were now more likely to be referred to as “root causes.”

The change in language is significant. If something is the *cause* of a behavior (rather than merely a “factor”), individual responsibility becomes less predominant in the calculus of accountability. In this new rendering, the perpetrator of crime is trapped in a Skinner box of social dysfunction that makes the exercise of judgment and free will difficult if not impossible—and thus he cannot be held responsible for his actions. This was a seductive idea to those who remained skeptical of the criminal-justice system, even as it overlooked the obvious fact that most people who grow up in high-risk environments don’t become criminals, and plenty of people who grow up with privilege do.

Alongside this focus on “root causes” for crime was a broader self-help movement that also contributed to the notion that, because of circumstances, people could not always be held accountable for their behavior. The phrase “hurt people hurt people” emerged in the 1990s, initially among self-help gurus (a book with that title by self-help author Sandra Wilson was published in 1993) but quickly spread into popular culture—along with the idea that even perpetrators of harm should be understood as potential victims.

By the 2000s, criminal-justice reformers regularly invoked the “victim-offender overlap” theory—the fact that many victims of crime are also perpetra-

* The U.S. Supreme Court declared New York’s law unconstitutional in 1991, calling it “overinclusive” and violative of the First Amendment.
Embracing deterministic social forces as exculpatory for perpetrators compromises justice for victims. A new revisionist impulse to erase victims is already underway.

tors of crime—to argue for more lenient consideration of criminal acts. It is true, as the National Institute of Justice notes in a 2021 report, that “statistically, being an individual who has committed violent crimes correlates with an elevated risk of later becoming a victim of violent crime. At the same time, violent crime victims have been shown to be more likely than others to later engage in violence.”

The error is introduced when advocates and leading legal theorists treat this as a deterministic certainty, one that should override personal responsibility. Stanford University professor Barbara Fried* argued in a 2013 symposium, “Beyond Blame,” that “the philosophy of personal responsibility has ruined criminal justice and economic policy. It’s time to move past blame.” Imagine being the victim of a brutal assault and hearing that one should just “move past blame.”

Likewise, law professor Adam Benforado argued in his 2015 book, Unfair, “Our surroundings often exert such a powerful influence that they all but erase the effects of disposition.” New research into brain science has prompted biologists to add their own insight to the challenge of free will and responsibility. Stanford’s Robert Sapolsky argued this: “Our growing knowledge about the brain makes the notions of volition, culpability, and, ultimately, the very premise of the criminal justice system, deeply suspect.”

Embracing the idea of deterministic social forces as exculpatory for perpetrators compromises justice for victims. Indeed, a new revisionist impulse to question or erase victims is already underway in academic circles. A symposium sponsored by the Brooklyn Law Review in 2022 showcased this approach in its title: “The Role of the Victim in the Criminal Legal System.” Note the scare quotes around the word “victim.”

Writing about the victim-offender overlap, Cynthia Godsoe, of Brooklyn Law School, claims the criminal-justice system’s inability to see perpetrators as victims constitutes a “failure to address the root causes and cyclical nature of violence” that “perpetuates a racialized narrative of individual culpability and a stark moral binary between those who harm and those who are harmed.” Yes, Professor Godsoe, it does. That’s exactly what justice requires: an assessment of an individual’s acts when they violate the rule of law and harm another person, even as judges and juries are asked to consider any mitigating circumstances. Eliminating the “stark moral binary” eliminates our ability to discern right from wrong and in the process removes the person of central moral importance when it comes to the pursuit of justice: the victim.

In this new paradigm, however, even the terms “victim” and “offender” are suspect. “Much of the terminology associated with the criminal system—including ‘victim’ and ‘offender’—are [sic] laden with normative and stigmatized concepts, and do not accurately capture the full experiences and humanity of either those who are harmed or those who harm,” Godsoe argues. She goes on to use the term “offender” only in quotes and argues that offenders (excuse me, “offenders”) suffer from “perpetration trauma,” or “trauma arising from committing violence.” Citing studies of post-traumatic stress disorder experienced by combat soldiers, she claims that the trauma experienced by violent criminals (as opposed to their victims) is underappreciated, “reflecting the dominant narrative about the moral culpability of those who commit crime, particularly violent crime.”

Her solution is to include violent offenders in decarceration efforts and to “dismantle the victim and ‘offender’ categories themselves.” Ultimately, she argues, we must “recognize the victimhood of those who harm, and conversely the harm committed by victims.”

Other contributors to the 2022 symposium offered equally dismissive approaches to victims. Two contributors criticized the rights of victims to offer victim-impact statements at trials, while another, Steven Zeidman, doubled down on the Skinner-box approach to personal responsibility with this observation: “Individual traits are not the driver of criminal behavior. Yet, the inability of those involved in the system to share evidence of their social background, and the refusal of actors in the system to view these factors as significantly mitigating, if not excusing, means that the problem is only swept under the rug.”

And so, despite the lessons learned from overly liberal crime policies in the previous century, many

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* Fried has been in the news in the past year because she is the mother of Sam Bankman-Fried, currently under indictment for massive financial fraud.
of them are ascendant again. We've seen the return of the decarceration and prison-abolition movement, the success of defund-the-police activism, and the end of cash bail, as well as claims that criminals simply can't help themselves or their behavior because they live at the whim of oppressive “systemic” forces that control their behavior.

These policies have a body count.

The end of cash bail for violent offenders has returned to the streets people who have killed or assaulted again, even as their victims' stories go untold or are ignored by activists. Excessive use of diversionary- and restorative-justice programs failed to have the desired effect of combatting crime; indeed, in many cities, prosecutors have simply given up prosecuting some crimes.

In Washington, D.C., awash in gun violence despite strict gun-control laws, more than 60 percent of arrests for carrying an unlicensed firearm are “no-papered” by the local attorney general—meaning prosecutors declined to prosecute the case. When asked by a local reporter about the steep rise in violent crime committed by juveniles—including the murder of a Lyft driver who had escaped war-torn Afghanistan to build a new life in the U.S. and the murder of a construction worker by a 14-year-old—D.C. Attorney General Brian Schwalb sounded like an unctuous therapist rather than a representative of law enforcement. He told a local news station that violent kids just need more “compassion” and “support” from the community. He said nothing about the victims or their grieving families. No wonder homicide rates are climbing in D.C. even as they decline slightly in many other cities. By the beginning of August 2023, D.C. had more than 150 homicides for the year, which puts it on track for a homicide rate higher than it has been for decades. D.C.’s U.S. Attorney Matthew M. Graves has also demonstrated an unwillingness to prosecute crime: He declined to press charges for 67 percent of the arrests his office received.

Social-justice concerns now predominate in discussions of crime. In a book titled *In Defense of Looting*, widely praised by left-leaning media outlets, including National Public Radio, Vicky Osterweil claims that destruction and looting represent “a new energy of resistance” that should be celebrated as questioning a “law and order” society that tolerates social and economic inequality. Osterweil has no time to consider the impact on the lives of the people whose livelihoods were destroyed and lives threatened by these liberating looters.

In noncriminal settings, such as K–12 schools, the logic of victimhood culture has encouraged the embrace of questionable restorative-justice programs to combat bullying and assaults. Rather than remove a dangerous student from school to protect most children, faculty make the victims of harassment and bullying discuss their feelings with the person who attacked them. Like so much of progressive criminal-justice theory, restorative justice is oriented toward the perpetrator, who is meant to be made to understand the harm he or she caused by having to confront his or her victim, as opposed to being made to accept the blame and punishment that ordinary justice demands. Reconciliation talks, group hugs, therapy circles—these ultimately put the perpetrator's needs front and center while encouraging the victim to believe that he or she has an obligation not only to listen to the attacker but to forgive. What if a victim doesn't want to confront his abuser and discuss his feelings, or listen to his attacker's feelings?

For adult victims of crime, the existing infrastructure for victims does not always meet their needs. A report from the Alliance for Safety and Justice found that although millions of Americans reported having been the victims of crime, “only 243,000 people had victims’ compensation applications approved” in 2018. Many crime victims aren’t aware such resources exist; or they are told that to receive them they must first exhaust all other avenues of financial support; or they must cooperate fully with law enforcement, which in some cases, such as domestic violence, might put them at great risk.

Even existing victims’ funds can’t provide compensation for the full costs of physical and psychological recovery, which include hours lost to anxiety and trauma in addition to healing from injuries. John Jay College of Criminal Justice estimates that between 2010 and 2020, the cost to hospitals of treating gunshot victims was $469 million, and nearly 70 percent of that cost was borne by taxpayers, both at the state and federal level (via Medicare and Medicaid payments).
If we don’t reject a culture of victimhood so expansive that it encompasses violent criminals, the consequences will be far more dire than rising crime rates.

As for the “root causes” invoked to explain away responsibility for the perpetrators of crime, the discussion of crime is conveniently turned into a hazy question of social justice, which is far more amenable territory for the (usually white) progressive activist class whose privilege protects them from the experience of crime. It has become impossible for a section of American elite opinion to even acknowledge that there is a place for punishment in a society where elites insist on tolerance (while insulating themselves from the effects of their tolerance by installing actual or virtual gates that prevent the bad guys from coming too close).

They are aided and abetted by the many progressive prosecutors happy to throw good money after bad platitudes when it comes to the perpetrators of crime. Jamila Hodge, a former federal prosecutor in Washington, D.C., claimed in The Appeal, “In all my time, I never met a person who had caused harm who hadn’t been a victim first, often facing trauma and harm beginning in childhood.” Her solution? To “shift away from punishment, rooted in slavery and racism, toward solutions that address the needs of communities ravaged by violence. What we build must deliver healing, safety, and accountability that repairs for all parties involved in harm—including the person who caused it.”

This is wrongheaded and dangerous. It is wrongheaded because it grants equal moral status to victims and perpetrators; and it is dangerous because, however nice such wishful thinking and “healing” rhetoric sound, its methods are ineffective at protecting innocent people from violent criminals. As D.C.’s crime rate demonstrates, Hodge and her ilk would have done better to spend more time reading history and criminal procedure and less time delivering their special brand of “healing.”

It is good and just to set boundaries for who is and who is not a real victim. Invoking broad claims of victimhood should never be used as an excuse for criminal behavior or as a tool of moral equivocation. It is true that many offenders are also victims. But distinguishing between good and criminal behavior, even within the lifespan of a single person, is possible and necessary.

In the communities often hardest hit by crime, minority neighborhoods, people are getting fed up—and some organizations are finally responding to them. Recently, the NAACP in Oakland issued an open letter calling on politicians to do more to prevent crime, including announcing a state of emergency: “Oakland residents are sick and tired of our intolerable public safety crisis that overwhelmingly impacts minority communities. Murders, shootings, violent armed robberies, home invasions, car break-ins, sideshows, and highway shootouts have become a pervasive fixture of life in Oakland.”

Violent crime is so common in Oakland that utility workers now require private security personnel to accompany them when they do their jobs. The reasons, according to the NAACP? “Failed leadership, including the movement to defund the police, our District Attorney’s unwillingness to charge and prosecute people who murder and commit life threatening serious crimes, and the proliferation of anti-police rhetoric have created a heyday for Oakland criminals. If there are no consequences for committing crime in Oakland, crime will continue to soar.”

And yet, the public officials charged with ensuring public safety place the consequences elsewhere. Mayor Johnson of Chicago recently responded to the precipitous rise in carjackings and car theft in the city (many committed by armed assailants) not by announcing policies to crack down on the criminals committing such acts—but by announcing that he would be suing the manufacturers of car such as Hyundai and Kia for making them too easy to steal! Many of the “reforms” touted by progressive activists and elected officials (making more crimes misdemeanors, eliminating cash bail, refusing to prosecute many crimes) benefit perpetrators while leaving victims and law-abiding citizens everywhere feeling as if their concerns and their rights no longer matter.

If we don’t reject a culture of victimhood so expansive that it encompasses violent criminals, the consequences will be far more dire than rising crime rates. We will have failed, as a society, to protect one another and to ensure swift and sure justice for our fellow citizens. Crime rates rise and fall, but a society whose citizens stop believing that justice is fair and right and possible can move in only one direction: downward.
The Karens Were Innocent

Because the media are hungry for racism

By Wilfred Reilly

It is no exaggeration to say that, over the past few years, one of the major topics in mainstream media has been the parlous behavior of white Americans harassing and abusing black people for no apparent reason. This is especially true when it comes to coverage of white women who somehow find themselves at cross-purposes with black males.

In 2018, a woman who came to be known as “BBQ Becky” had, we were informed, chased an innocent black group out of a park in Oakland, California, apparently outraged just to see African Americans cheerfully grilling in public. In May 2020, a New Yorker named Amy Cooper was walking her dog when she encountered black bird-watcher Christian Cooper, on whom she called the cops for what we were told was no apparent reason—and by doing so, potentially “put his life at risk.” She became known as the “Central Park Karen.”

A year later, a white woman in a Brooklyn dog park told an upper-middle-class black writer to “go back to the hood.” In 2023, “Citibike Karen,” a nurse at Bellevue Hospital, allegedly tried to steal a rental bicycle from a group of black teenagers—the clear implication being that she thought her white privilege entitled her to the two-wheeler if she wanted it.

These incidents set off significant real-world reverberations. A month after the Coopers encountered each other in Central Park, Andrew Cuomo, then the governor of New York, signed into law NY Senate Bill 8492, widely known as the Anti-Karen Act. The law “imposes a...penalty for calling the cops on a black person” or member of any other legally protected class, at least when no very direct proof exists that “a crime or offense, or imminent threat to person or property,
The collapse of the Karen tales hardly stands alone. Simply put, virtually every major claim made during and around the recent ‘Racial Reckoning’ turned out to be untrue.

is occurring.” Around the same time, a law literally titled the CAREN Act was proposed and passed by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors. And so, in at least two of the nation’s most prominent and populous left-leaning states, simply calling the cops on suspicious-looking people is now a risky business—if they’re the wrong color.

It was nonsense. Over the course of the several years that followed 2020’s peak Covid-and–George-Floyd hysteria, virtually every “Karen” tale was revealed to be something not far from a complete hoax.

Roughly in order: It turned out that BBQ Becky (real name Jennifer Schulte) had called the cops only because the black family was cooking out in a “dog run” area of a public park where fire was prohibited, and they had refused a polite request to move. She reacted a bit more sharply, perhaps, than most city dwellers would have, but she was in the right.

As for Central Park’s Amy Cooper, she herself noted on Bari Weiss’s Honestly podcast that she had become alarmed and had engaged police because the male bird-watcher she encountered began behaving irrationally and threateningly toward her pet—pulling dog treats out of his clothes, trying to lure Cooper’s beloved dog over to him, and telling Amy he was going to do “something” to her or the pooch that “she was not going to like.” Cooper’s fellow Big Apple dog fancier, Brooklyn’s Emma Sarley, actually contacted area media herself after the story about her also went viral. She declared that there had been no racial overtones whatsoever to what she had said and argued that, when she said “your hood,” she was referring simply to another well-known dog park.

The nonsense had a cost, not only in the passage of unnecessary and arguably unconstitutional laws but also in the ruination of the lives of the women tagged with these offenses. Amy Cooper became a famous urban villain and lost her livelihood. Then there was “Citibike Karen.” Sarah Comrie is a nurse. She was, at the time, heavily pregnant. And no, she did not in fact attempt to jack a cheap bicycle from five fighting-age black men. Comrie’s attorney was able to provide literal receipts that showed she had in fact been the one to rent the bicycle over which the argument with the teenage black kids erupted. Comrie was not only called “retarded” during the confrontation but had her distended stomach touched in a potentially threatening way. All in all, she had either been the victim of an attempted theft herself or was simply involved in an unfortunate good-faith misunderstanding.

In either case, the willingness of millions of urbanites and tens of millions of TV viewers to believe these patently false narratives says a great deal about the bizarre level of artificial sensitivity that whites are expected to tote into American discussions of racial affairs.

Not to mention the “napping while black” incident at Yale, when a Ph.D. candidate named Sarah Braasch awakened the somnolent student Siyonbola and called the campus cops on her. This became a major social incident in 2018, with Siyonbola interviewed on morning talk shows about the grave offense done to her by a racist. The problem: Sarah Braasch is an internationally known anti-racist. Braasch spent years overseas, working with French and Maghrebi human-rights organizations such as Ni Putes Ni Sumises (roughly: “Neither Whores nor Submissive Women”) that assist an almost entirely Arab and African black client pool. While Siyonbola likely did think Braasch a bigot—Braasch had once called campus security on a male friend of Siyonbola’s after being followed into an elevator and then her dorm floor by the unknown man—Braasch simply is not. Following an extensive investigation by Yale, all “charges” against Braasch “were formally withdrawn,” and at least nine “glowing” letters supporting her were filed by left-leaning Yale University professors. Braasch was not called a “Karen,” but she would have been had the slang term been in use at the time her troubles began.

The collapse of the Karen tales hardly stands alone. Simply put, virtually every major claim made during and around the recent “Racial Reckoning” turned out to be untrue. Jussie Smollett’s claims of racial violence turned out to be a hoax hate crime when or just before the Reckoning began, and more recently, a 19-year-old named Carlee Russell was forced to confess she had “disappeared” herself after her supposed kidnapping became headline news. The kids from a Covington, Kentucky, Catholic school who attended a pro-life march in Washington never attacked a Native-American elder and never tried to take his sacred rain drum away. In fact, they turned out to have been the victims—taunted by adult men of various races during
It’s hard to see how a constant stream of insulting allegations against whites could improve race relations or convince over-the-line bigots that their brief is in error.

an ugly confrontation they handled well. In the end, one of the kids, Nick Sandmann, was awarded millions of dollars in a legal settlement with the Washington Post, which had defamed him.

Oh, and while on the subject of this continent’s original indigenous inhabitants, there were never any “mass graves” on the campuses of the old residential schools for First Nations people in America’s Hat, Canada. The abnormalities under the shifting surface of the earth’s soil there are most likely tree roots. Back in the U.S., notorious state-line-crosser Kyle Rittenhouse was properly found not guilty after being charged with murder in the middle of a riot in Kenosha, Wisconsin, during which he had clearly fired only in self-defense.

The same pattern of collapse goes for larger and broader claims of American racism run amok. The total number of unarmed black men shot annually by police—a figure commonly said for around a decade to be in the “thousands,” or “one every 28 hours,” or “(a) genocide”—was eventually revealed (by me and other authors) to be on the order of 15. The fact can now be verified by anyone interested simply by checking an excellent comprehensive database maintained by the Washington Post.

Similarly, interracial violent crime involving both blacks and whites—described during the peak “Karen” hysteria as though it were constant and almost totally white-on-black—in fact turns out to make up perhaps 3 percent of U.S. criminal activity and to be almost 90 percent black-on-white. These stats come from unimpeachable source documents, including the last pre-Covid Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) reports. It is close to being no exaggeration at all to say that nothing we taxpayers were told for several years (and not just in this arena of race, but that’s another article) was true.

So: How could this happen? What made objectively intelligent people go along with clear nonsense, of a “there’s a pregnant nurse out here robbing five black guys of a bike they rented” variety, for half a decade? From a social-science standpoint, many things probably contributed to this pattern. “Mass hysteria” or “mass formation psychosis” is a well-documented psychic deformation going back at least to the Dutch tulip-bulb mania of the 1600s. And given the currency that victimhood has come to hold in our narcissistic society, it makes sense that the Christian Coopers and Lolade Siyonbolas have a ready audience when they pretend they have been traumatized by unpleasant exchanges that are entirely ordinary.

But there is a third and more important factor here, which largely predicts the willingness of some to believe facially absurd claims of victimhood—or at least pretend to. There is currently a very intense demand for evidence of racism in America—by which I mean the real, old-school kind of stuff. The demand far outweighs any potential supply of it. The need is based, I believe, in an aching desire to find a socially acceptable explanation for certain obvious struggles in minority and in particular black communities, such as the astonishing 73 percent illegitimacy rate for native-born black Americans.

Below the surface of a great deal of high- and upper-middlebrow conversation stirs a lurking worry that, as Charles Murray and Glenn Loury recently discussed, if racism can’t or doesn’t explain such problems, perhaps something else can and should. For example, perhaps, the now-forbidden “hereditarians” are correct, and a far deeper problem exists. We thus often see a strange phenomenon indeed: media coverage that seems to be almost relieved any time something that might be an example of the real stuff actually turns up.

This is frankly stupid, and it helps no one. The black illegitimacy/out-of-wedlock birth rate was 11 percent in 1938, when bigotry was far worse and the genetic makeup of the African-American community very similar to what it is today. Scholars such as Walter Williams and the legendary Thomas Sowell have argued almost since that year that “culturalist” variables such as daily study time for children and region of residence for populations predict most group-level outcomes far better than genes—or racial mistreatment.

Whatever the case, it’s hard to see how a constant stream of insulting allegations against whites— invariably followed by narrative collapse—could do much to improve race relations or convince actual over-the-line bigots that their brief is in error. When it comes to actually fixing problems like fatherlessness—among black and now all Americans—the very first step would seem to be identifying exactly how the problem breaks down. Let’s start doing that and leave the Karens alone. ❯
Bibi’s Seven
Presidents

His decades of experience have served Israel well

By Tevi Troy

It would have been surprising only if Biden hadn’t kept Bibi at an arm’s distance. His administration was predisposed to look skeptically at the new Netanyahu government. Even a previous Bibi premiership had earned Bibi a talking-to from Biden. According to Netanyahu’s memoir, My Story, Biden had warned him in 2021 that “this is not Scoop Jackson’s Democratic Party”—by which the president seems to have meant that the party Biden now leads is far less friendly to Israel than it was back in the 1970s when the pro-Israel Jackson was its leading foreign-policy light.

Of course, Netanyahu needed no such education from Biden. He has been studying, befriending, and clashing with American presidents over a political career that began in the early 1980s. He has maneuvered in a challenging political environment in Washington across five decades. His method is not just to build personal relationships but to use the force of argument to make the case for his point of view. As he describes the formula in his memoir: “Influence governments...”
During the George H.W. Bush administration, Bibi was a rising Israeli political star, but he came crosswise of a White House that was less friendly to his country’s interests.

through public opinion, influence public opinion by appealing to justice, influence leaders by appealing to interests.” He learned this from his father, Benzion Netanyahu, who in turn learned it from the Zionist intellectual Zev Jabotinsky. Jabotinsky believed that making one’s case forcefully and persistently in a democratic society is the best way to bring about preferred policy outcomes. Bibi Netanyahu turned the idea into a reality.

After his brother Jonathan was killed in Israel’s legendary rescue of its hostages from hijackers in Entebbe in 1976, Bibi created the Jonathan Institute to alert the world to the challenges of terrorism. He organized two conferences on the problem of international terrorism, both attended by thinkers and world leaders. To the first, in Jerusalem in 1979, he invited former CIA head and presidential hopeful George H.W. Bush. Netanyahu’s father had suggested he invite Ronald Reagan as well, but Netanyahu refused, unwisely dismissing Reagan as “an actor.” Benzion Netanyahu pushed back, saying, “He’s a man of conviction. Invite him.” The son did not listen and later regretted it.

By the time of the next conference, in Washington in 1984, Netanyahu had absorbed the lesson. He was by this point working as a diplomat in the Israeli Embassy in Washington but helped organize matters behind the scenes. He invited multiple officials from his administration—among them Secretary of State George Shultz and Reagan counselor Edwin Meese. Netanyahu had missed his opportunity in 1979 to develop a personal relationship with Reagan, but he kept at it and worked to see that his ideas about the need to hold state sponsors of terror accountable for their actions influenced the thinking and actions of Reagan and key members of his administration.

During the George H.W. Bush administration, Netanyahu was a rising Israeli political star, but he came crosswise of a White House that was less friendly to his country’s interests. His persistence was viewed as obnoxious, and during White House aide Robert Gates actually asked his boss, National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, to ban Netanyahu from the White House grounds. Netanyahu did not do much better at the State Department. James Baker, who was both secretary of state and President Bush’s best friend, also banned him from Foggy Bottom.

While the State Department ban officially stemmed from Netanyahu’s comment that American foreign policy in the Middle East was “based on lies and distortions,” it was really the result of disagreements on policy. President Bush had pressed Israeli officials not to retaliate against Iraqi Scud missile strikes during the first Gulf War. Netanyahu had disagreed and said Israel should maintain its ability to strike back. Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, under heavy pressure, sided with Bush and agreed not to retaliate. After the war, the administration convened a conference in Madrid designed to impose a “land for peace” plan on Israel vis-à-vis the Palestinians in the wake of the American victory over Saddam Hussein. Netanyahu attended, unhappily, and—again, publicly—objected to the proceedings. Netanyahu also made clear his disgust with the Bush administration’s threat to withhold loan guarantees to Israel if Israel continued to build in disputed areas on the West Bank. This last issue caused an uproar, and in the 1992 election, Bush saw a precipitous drop in his Jewish support, gaining only 11 percent—down from the 35 percent he had received in 1988.

During the Clinton administration, Netanyahu rose to prime minister after winning a 1996 election to replace acting Prime Minister Shimon Peres following the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. To say that Clinton and company were disappointed at the result is an understatement. Clinton actively tried to have Netanyahu defeated in the election, but, he later admitted, “I tried to do it in a way that didn’t overtly involve me.” Clinton hadn’t fooled anyone. When Netanyahu next came to the White House, Clinton remembered that Netanyahu “wanted me to know that he knew I wasn’t for him and he beat us anyway.”

Clinton recalled of the episode that Netanyahu “was being very Bibi.” But Clinton had also learned a lesson, recognizing that Bibi was now the leader of the country: “If I wanted to support the peace I had to find a way to work with him.” Clinton recognized that he’d been outmaneuvered: “I wasn’t so much angry as just bemused by the brashness with which he played his hand. But that’s who he is. He did a very good job of it.”

Despite Clinton’s appreciation of Netanyahu’s political abilities, the two remained on different sides of key issues and continued to have a tense relation-
Despite the tension, there were successes for Netanyahu in the Obama years, including the signing in September 2016 of a 10-year, $38 billion arms agreement.
a joint session of Congress irked many Democrats, who felt that Netanyahu was showing up Obama. Netanyahu’s memoir shows that he was aware of the risk of alienating Democratic allies, but he thought: “If I don’t take a stand on a nuclear deal that could threaten Israel’s survival... what the hell am I doing here? That clinched it.”

The price was high. Many Democratic allies are still angry with Netanyahu for having given the speech. Even Obama’s vice president recognized how hostile the Obama administration had been as a whole to Israel and to Netanyahu. At one point, Joe Biden said to Bibi, “You don’t have too many friends here, buddy. I’m the one friend you do have. So call me when you need to.” The two men did have something resembling a personal friendship. In 1999, Biden was the sole American politician to write Netanyahu a letter after he lost his premiership for the first time. In 2014, Netanyahu and his wife hosted Biden for dinner when Biden visited Israel to attend Ariel Sharon’s funeral. As Netanyahu wrote of the visit, “Biden, always the gentleman, sent [Bibi’s wife] Sara a bouquet of flowers and a thoughtful note the next day.” Biden also has spoken of giving a photo to Netanyahu with the inscription, “Bibi, I don’t agree with a damn thing you say, but I love you.”

There were no such friendly gestures between the Obamas and the Netanyahus. Obama even kicked Netanyahu on his way out the door, orchestrating an anti-Israel resolution in the UN demanding that Israel “immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory” and calling Israeli establishments in Palestinian territory a “flagrant violation” under international law. The measure served little purpose beyond revenge. The administration’s feeble protestations that the U.S. had not been responsible for it fooled no one, least of all Netanyahu, who told the press that “we have no doubt that the Obama administration initiated it, stood behind it, coordinated on the wording and demanded that it be passed.”

Netanyahu was pleased to still be in office when Obama departed. Obama’s successor, Donald Trump, and Netanyahu had had a friendly relationship before Trump’s presidency—Trump recorded a video endorsing Netanyahu in 2013—and Israeli officials were welcome and frequent guests in the Trump White House. The close relations bore fruit: The Trump administration pulled out of Obama’s Iran deal, moved the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, recognized Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, and helped bring about the Abraham Accords peace agreements with four Muslim countries. These were all major achievements for Netanyahu. Perhaps more important, Trump’s moves vindicated two long-standing arguments Netanyahu had been making for decades. First, that the West’s fear of the “Arab Street” and the regional instability it would cause was overstated. And second, that there were pathways to peace that did not rely on an agreement with the recalcitrant Palestinians.

After the 2020 election, Netanyahu called Biden to congratulate him on winning the election. It was the right thing to do, as Biden was about to become president and would not have forgiven Bibi if he hadn’t done so. But with Trump leading the polls for the 2024 Republican nomination and a weak Biden vulnerable in the upcoming election, Netanyahu is in a difficult position going into the next cycle. Both the president and his former-president challenger may seek some kind of loyalty test from Netanyahu next year. Trump was so angry when Netanyahu called Biden that he later said, “I haven’t spoken to him since. F— him.”

As for Biden, he has said multiple times that he “loves” Netanyahu, even if they disagree on policy. Biden is more favorably disposed to Israel than Obama, and he also seems to recognize that Netanyahu is a canny political operator and a survivor who has returned again and again upon being counted out.

At the same time, Biden and his administration have been persistently negative toward the new government, with Biden offering typically inarticulate criticism: “I think it’s a mistake to think that, as some members of his cabinet—and this is one of the most extreme members of cabinets that I have seen.” He has been obstinate in not issuing an invitation for Netanyahu to visit Washington, a shortsighted stance Biden later abandoned with the vague promise of a meeting once the administration learned that Netanyahu had planned to go to China to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

As Netanyahu deals with another censorious administration, the history of his previous interactions with six other American presidents can provide insight.
Bibi Netanyahu surely has his own extensive experience to help guide him through the thickets of current American policy. He has cards to play even now.

into how things may proceed. Netanyahu cannot count on getting the kind of policy support that he got from the Trump administration. But he does have his own extensive experience to help guide him through the thickets of current American policy. He has cards to play even now.

First, there is his sense of the larger picture, which he derives from reading what he calls “my guide, history books.” Regardless of short-term disagreements, he believes that the U.S. and Israel are on the same side in a larger struggle of free nations against tyrannies. The second card he has to play is patience. He saw the opportunity for the Abraham Accords but waited until he got the right American partner. As he put it in an interview with the Washington Examiner’s Seth Mandel: “It took me a while to persuade President Trump. Couldn’t persuade President Obama or President Clinton, with whom I worked.” The third card is his willingness to take his case directly to the American public in a variety of media, even when the American president and he disagree. This strategy may be less effective in Democratic administrations as the left becomes more hostile to Israel, but it still can work with the broad swath of the American public, which supports Israel on the whole.

Most important, Netanyahu knows that dealing with a hostile American administration, Democratic or Republican, is a complex game and one he has occasionally played poorly—or has simply been dealt a very bad hand, as was the case with the hostility toward his country shown by both the elder Bush and Obama. That said, his approach across these seven presidents has led to remarkable successes and demonstrates just how nimble and creative a leader he can be.
On Behalf of Their People

Providence and Power: Ten Portraits in Jewish Statesmanship
By Meir Y. Soloveichik
Encounter Books, 224 pages

Reviewed by Jeff Jacoby

A NY BOOK on Jewish statesmanship must contend with the fact that for most of the past two millennia, Jews had no state. Jewish sovereignty in the Holy Land came to a cataclysmic end in 70 C.E., when the Roman legions under Titus destroyed Jerusalem and burned its great temple. Not until 1948, with the proclamation of the new State of Israel, would Jewish statehood be revived in the Jewish homeland.

In Providence and Power: Ten Portraits in Jewish Statesmanship, Meir Y. Soloveichik sets out to fill a gap in the vast literature of political leadership—the lack, in his words, of any studies focused on “the particular nature of Jewish statecraft” or devoted to “outstanding exemplars of that calling.” To remedy that deficiency, he profiles an array of leaders drawn from the long history of the Jewish people, from the biblical King David in the 10th century B.C.E. to David Ben-Gurion and Menachem Begin 3,000 years later.

David, the quintessential Jewish monarch, reigned in Jerusalem during the First Jewish Commonwealth. Ben-Gurion and Begin, the most important prime ministers in the history of modern Israel, likewise governed a sovereign Jewish state. But just one other leader included by Soloveichik was a Jewish ruler in a Jewish land: the Second Temple-era Queen Shlomtsion (also known as Salome Alexandra), who became monarch of Judea a century before the Roman conquest.

In the context of Providence and Power, those four are the exceptions to the rule. All the book’s other subjects—among them the Sephardi sage and courtier Don Isaac Abra-
vanel; the eminent 17th-century Amsterdam rabbi Menasseh ben Israel; and Theodor Herzl, the father of modern political Zionism—were individuals who lived after Jewish national independence was crushed and before it was reborn. They represented no Jewish government; they were not diplomats or foreign ministers answerable to a Jewish principal; they were not backed by the authority of any Jewish army, parliament, or regime. So isn’t it something of a stretch to hold them out as archetypes of Jewish statesmanship?

Not at all, argues Soloveichik. “Statecraft is, at its essence, the marshaling and application of available power on behalf of one’s people,” he writes, and also, in the Jewish case, the representation of one’s people before the powerful. During those stateless millennia, it was often precisely the challenges of life in dispersion and subjugation that gave rise to some of the most compelling embodiments of Jewish statesmanship on the part of figures who refused to give up on the Jews as a people and who acted in the political realm to safeguard their posterity.

In short, statesmanship is possible even in the absence of statehood or state power. The men and women highlighted by Soloveichik lived in different lands and centuries, but they were linked by what he calls “the fixed lodestar of their own Jewish identity and the high compelling duty of service to the well-being of the Jewish people.”

Soloveichik is, of course, well known to readers of Commentary, for which he has written a monthly column since 2017. He is renowned in the Jewish world for his intellectual agility, his brilliance as a writer and speaker, and his prolific output. In 2013, he became the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel, the oldest synagogue in the United States (the shul’s website identifies him as “our tenth minister since the American Revolution”). He is also the director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University and the creator of the remarkable daily podcasts Bible 365 (a book-by-book examination of the entire Hebrew Bible) and Jerusalem 365 (a survey of the holy city’s 4,000-year history).

The overarching theme of Providence and Power is the defense of Jewish national identity. Over the millennia, that defense took vastly different forms. For Esther, the secret Jew who became queen in the Persian court, it meant crafting a strategy to thwart a planned anti-Semitic genocide. For Louis Brandeis, a committed assimilationist, it meant becoming an outspoken champion of Zionism and then, at a delicate moment, assuring Britain’s foreign minister of crucial behind-the-scenes American support for issuing the Balfour Declaration. For Benjamin Disraeli—the book’s only non-Jewish “Jewish” statesman—it meant an unprecedented speech in the House of Commons, in which he advocated the right of Jews to enter Parliament by invoking the debt Christianity owed to Judaism.

And for Abravanel, who to my mind is the most tragic and haunting figure in the book, defending the Jewish people meant relinquishing all his personal prestige, wealth, and power—not once, but twice. A towering Torah scholar and financier who rose to the heights of influence in Portuguese society, he lost everything in 1483 when he was forced to flee by the accession of a hostile new king. Incredibly, Abravanel rebuilt his career in neighboring Spain, becoming a trusted adviser and banker in the court of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella—only to lose it all again in 1492, when the royal couple ordered the expulsion of every Jew from their kingdom. Many prominent Spanish Jews retained their holdings by converting to Christianity, and the king and queen offered Abravanel fantastic honors and inducements if he would do likewise. Not only did he refuse, he had the audacity to tell them that what they were doing was futile—that the Jewish people and their faith were eternal, and not even the Catholic monarchs of Spain could destroy them.

Typically, statesmen are remembered for what they do. “But sometimes,” Soloveichik comments, what they refuse to do can more truly define their legacy. Isaac
Abravanel, with the eyes of Spanish Jewry upon him, with his fellow pleaders at court prepared to forswear their identity, with the most powerful monarchs in the world inviting him to take his place beside them and reap the rewards, gave up everything for his faith.

Ultimately Abravanel left Spain with tens of thousands of other Jews, having failed in his desperate efforts to get the order of expulsion revoked. But it is in his defiant defense of the Jewish faith that Soloveichik sees true statesmanship. He quotes the conclusion of Ben Zion Netanyahu, the great historian of the Spanish Inquisition (and father of the current Israeli prime minister): “Abravanel lost the political battle... but [he] also fought for his people's soul, and in this struggle he won a complete victory.”

PROVIDENCE and Power originated as a series of lectures delivered for the Tikvah Fund. The book reflects the strengths of that format, at which Soloveichik excels.

The very different Jewish leaders he portrays come alive in his accounts, as he mixes poignant details of human interest into compelling descriptions of the environment in which each individual lived and worked. The author’s erudition is immense, but he deploys it lightly and to the point. As in a good lecture, each portrait in the book is replete with memorable sketches, surprising asides, interesting quotations, and a clear conclusion. In his chapter on King David, for example, Soloveichik comfortably disputes Isaiah Berlin’s famous hedgehog-and-fox analogy, quotes Natan Sharansky’s memoir of life in the Gulag, discusses the famous 1967 photograph of Israeli paratroopers at the Western Wall, ad-

duces Winston Churchill’s biographer on the subject of Churchill’s towering ego, and cites multiple passages from the Books of Samuel and Psalms. And he does it all without losing track of his central point, namely David’s awareness of God’s presence as a constant throughout his career.

To be clear, this is an informal, anecdotal volume. It is not meant to be a systematic or scholarly analysis of statesmanship. Though Soloveichik ends his book by drawing out several themes common to the lives of the men and women he recounts, his foremost purpose is plainly to tell their stories, placing them in the sweep of the larger, timeless narrative of the Jewish people themselves. Such a book would be valuable at any time; it is especially so today, when the Jewish world is rocked by intense acrimony and ill will and when the phrase “Jewish statesmanship” seems almost mockingly ironic.

In Providence and Power, one of the great communicators of modern American Jewry has taken it upon himself to show how the Jewish past, even during the long centuries of statelessness, was illuminated by paragons of statescraft and vision. We can only pray that men and women of their caliber will emerge to shape the Jewish present and future as well.

**CONFESSIONS AND WORK**

The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 has suffered a frustrating fate in the American consciousness. Although the war was launched to broaden approval, it went terribly wrong and soon became held up as a ruinous ideological crusade. Clear analysis was subsumed by a tide of myths about neoconservativism, a lying president, and “blood for oil.” Today, the war is barely discussed in a foreign-policy context at all. Rather, it comes up in our domestic politics as yet another detail in the case against a blundering Washington establishment. All this motivated hysteria has made it difficult to look back on the invasion of Iraq with the kind of seriousness that such investigations require.

The first, most important, thing to note about Melvyn P. Leffler’s Confronting Saddam Hussein is that it makes an effort to do just that. The second is that it succeeds. Leffler has written a plain, old-fashioned history. That is to say there is no partisan or ideological argument to contend with. And, not coincidentally, there are

A True History

**Confronting Saddam Hussein:**

George W. Bush and the Invasion of Iraq

By Melvyn P. Leffler

Oxford University Press, 368 pages

Reviewed by Abe Greenwald

THE AMERICAN invasion of Iraq in 2003 has suffered a frustrating fate in the American consciousness. Although the war was launched to broaden approval, it went terribly wrong and soon became held up as a ruinous ideological crusade. Clear analysis was subsumed by a tide of myths about neoconservativism, a lying president, and “blood for oil.” Today, the war is barely discussed in a foreign-policy context at all. Rather, it comes up in our domestic politics as yet another detail in the case against a blundering Washington establishment. All this motivated hysteria has made it difficult to look back on the invasion of Iraq with the kind of seriousness that such investigations require.

The first, most important, thing to note about Melvyn P. Leffler’s Confronting Saddam Hussein is that it makes an effort to do just that. The second is that it succeeds. Leffler has written a plain, old-fashioned history. That is to say there is no partisan or ideological argument to contend with. And, not coincidentally, there are
no writerly flourishes. Leffler, a professor of history at the University of Virginia, is strictly after the facts of the matter and seems to have undertaken the project with a genuine sense of curiosity about “the most consequential U.S. foreign-policy decision of the 21st century.”

He states his aims at the outset: “I want to examine why the United States decided to invade Iraq and why the war went awry so quickly, leading to tragedy for Iraqis and Americans.” To do this, he conducted extensive interviews with Bush-administration policymakers and read as much official documentation as was available. The result is a kaleidoscopic but clear rendering of a long-misunderstood administration that hoped to avoid, then prepared to fight, and finally initiated war.

Leffler frames the decision to invade Iraq as the last stage in a long developing showdown between Saddam Hussein and the United States. And in his opening chapter on the life of Hussein, the accurate recounting of the facts is more than sufficient to create a lurid portrait of a life-long monster. There’s much here that the “Sure, Saddam was bad, but” crowd would do well to learn.

Hussein was raised in a mud hut outside of Tikrit and took to tyranny in childhood, “fighting, stealing, lying, and inflicting cruelty on little animals.” It’s clear that we’re in the world of the psychopath. By adolescence, he was a gun-wielding street fighter. By 21, he was in jail for murdering a Communist who had insulted his uncle. He initiates numerous murder plots and strong-arm maneuvers and rises through the ranks of the Ba‘th Party, landing in an unofficial position in the Iraqi cabinet. At his new perch, Hussein honed his methods of terror. He invented infiltration plots, blaming Jews, Iran, and Communists, and disposed of the “plotters” in horror-movie fashion. “His victims might be dropped in buckets of acid,” Leffler writes. “Others might be forced to witness the rapes of their wives, daughters, or mothers.” When Hussein became president of Iraq in 1979, he organized a meeting at which he accused 66 members of his own government of a “painful and atrocious plot.” He then handed pistols to government delegates and instructed them to shoot the supposed conspirators in the head. Leffler writes, “Hussein filmed this entire event as meticulously as he filmed the conference itself.” That was merely the inception ceremony of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. The murder and madness grew, traversed national borders, and endured for 24 years.

Leffler’s characterization of George W. Bush’s path from first son to president is pedestrian by contrast, since the facts of Bush’s somewhat wayward youth and his religious redemption are already sufficiently known. But Leffler’s take is valuable in demonstrating that, upon taking office, neither Bush nor most of his foreign-policy team had any interest in toppling Saddam Hussein or establishing democracy in Iraq. Contrary to popular imagination, this was no neoconservative cabal. “For the most part,” Leffler writes, “they were pragmatists who wanted to sustain the country’s military superiority, strengthen its alliances, promote open and free trade, and nurture better relations with America’s neighbors in the Western Hemisphere, especially Mexico—something the president cared a lot about.”

What changed everything, of course, were the attacks of 9/11. But even after that, Bush was slow in coming around to focusing on Iraq. In the days immediately following 9/11, “he repeatedly rejected suggestions from [Secretary of Defense Donald] Rumsfeld and [Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul] Wolfowitz that Iraq become a target for initial action. ‘We’ll get to Iraq at the appropriate time,’ he declared.”

And, for their part, what interested Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz about Iraq was not its dearth of democracy or the prospects for regime change, but rather its capacity to hit the U.S. even harder than al-Qaeda had. This wasn’t the position of the Defense Department alone:

If 19 Saudis with boxcutters could do what they did on 9/11, [National Security Advisor Stephen] Hadley said, “think about Saddam Hussein who’s developing WMD and supports terror—what he could do, and what he could give the terrorists, and...
what they could do with it.” [Condoleezza] Rice explained her thinking this way: “We’d failed to connect the dots on September 10, and never imagined the use of civilian airliners as missiles against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon; that an unconstrained Saddam might aid a terrorist in an attack on the United States did not seem far-fetched.”

What’s been thoroughly buried in the years of “Bush lied, people died” propaganda is the sheer deluge of daily intelligence linking Hussein to terrorism and, yes, asserting that he had an active WMD program. This was the opinion of intelligence services not only in the U.S. but everywhere. There were reports that Iraq was training terrorists to hijack U.S. ships, reports that Hussein sought uranium in Niger, reports that Iraqi Special services were lending support to al-Qaeda, Czech intelligence told the CIA that 9/11 hijacker Mohamed Atta had met with Iraqi intelligence in Prague two days before 9/11. An Iraqi defector in Germany told the U.S. that Hussein was working on biological weapons. Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak told Commander of the United States Central Command Tommy Franks, “I tell you the truth. Saddam, he has the WMD. He told me he will use it on you.”

Covert U.S. agents were told by virtually everyone in Iraq itself that Hussein had weapons of mass destruction. British intelligence claimed that Iraq had “31,000 chemical munitions, 4,000 tons of precursor chemicals for chemical weapons, 610 tons of precursor chemicals for the nerve agent VX, and very large quantities of growth media acquired for the production of biological weapons.” It was all wrong—which was a monumental scandal in itself. But it wasn’t a lie.

At the same time, Hussein was making jihadist speeches and supporting Hamas. He had kicked weapons inspectors out of Iraq, and the international sanctions regime against him was falling apart. And he had duped inspectors in the past. “The lesson of 9/11 was simple,” Bush himself later wrote. “Don’t take chances.” When he came around to the notion that Iraq was a massive threat to the U.S., it was simply because that was the most likely scenario given the intelligence and Hussein’s known history. And Bush couldn’t take the chance of a deadly attack on America.

Even then, however, Bush didn’t want war. His emphasis was on “coercive diplomacy.” That’s why the U.S. sought multiple UN Security Council resolutions aimed at getting inspectors into Iraq. The idea was to give Hussein a choice: Come clean or face American arms. And the latter was not at all preferred by the Bush administration. When

When Bush came around to the notion that Iraq was a massive threat to the U.S., it was because that was the most likely scenario given the intelligence and Hussein’s known history. And Bush couldn’t take the chance.

French president Jacques Chirac and German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder publicly opposed a second UN resolution authorizing American force should Hussein not comply, they were standing in the way of Bush’s effort to avoid war, not wage it.

But Hussein resisted all diplomatic efforts, hoping to call Bush’s bluff, and we went to war. Leffler details the many ways it went wrong. And he readily faults Bush as the man who made the wrong decisions. But none of it has to do with allegations of lying, religious messianism, or being led around by a gang of ideologues.

Dispelling those myths, Confronting Saddam Hussein focuses on the administration’s genuine failings. First, Bush let infighting between the Pentagon and the State Department fester without resolution. Eventually, the sides were barely talking to each other. Second, Donald Rumsfeld, who comes off believably as the worst player of the bunch, was obsessed with a maintaining a small military footprint in Iraq. Third, there really was a shocking absence of postwar planning. When officials turned to talk of democracy promotion, it was because the country the U.S. had invaded had ceased to exist as any kind of governed entity at all. It needed to be rebuilt, and we weren’t about to establish a dictatorship. And finally, of course, the intelligence leading up to the war was garbage—and everyone had believed it.

Leffler’s book is crucial. The problem with erroneous criticisms of historic decisions is that we take away erroneous lessons. Confronting Saddam Hussein, however, is necessary in both correcting the historical record and offering a map of the mistakes that we should never repeat. That, after all, is the value of old-fashioned history.
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No Culture Wars, Please, We're Academics

The Two-Parent Privilege: How Americans Stopped Getting Married and Started Falling Behind
By Melissa S. Kearney
University of Chicago, 215 pages

Reviewed by
Naomi Schaefer Riley

A FEW YEARS AGO, Melissa S. Kearney got into a taxi cab and asked the driver about a photo of a young girl on his dashboard. The driver confirmed it was his daughter and then proudly showed her more pictures. The girl lived with her mother, he explained. Kearney, a professor of economics at the University of Maryland, asked why he didn’t live with them. “I don’t know,” he said. “We talk about it. If we save up some money, we might get married.” She pressed the issue, acknowledging that she had a professional interest in the subject: “I don’t mean to pry but if you guys get along and you both love your daughter, why don’t you live together as a family?” To which the man finally replied, “Did my mom send you or something?”

Marriage has been on the decline for decades now. As Kearney writes in her book The Two-Parent Privilege, “in 2019, only 63% of children lived with married parents, down from 77% in 1980.” The truth is that not many mothers, let alone economics professors, are even bothering to harass their adult children about tying the knot. And in principle, Kearney doesn’t have a problem with that. She says she likes being married herself and sees emotional and psychological benefits to the institution. But when it comes to addressing how the presence of two parents in a home affects children, she assures readers, “I answer these questions as an economist, not as someone with a moral or value-laden proposition.” In fact, she says, “it is really challenging to discuss the topics of marriage and family without it feeling like a conversation about values.” She hopes that “we can take them out of the intractable culture wars” and “debate them.”

For those outside the academy, like the taxi driver, this challenge might seem like a low bar. Why not debate the benefits of marriage? Lots of people may at some point wonder about the choices they should make in life or what effect living with a single parent has on children’s long-term prospects. To those who work in higher education, this task is all but impossible. How can you support this patriarchal institution, let alone render judgment on whether one family structure is better than another?

In her book, Kearney makes the case that conservatives have been making for years—that growing up in a single-parent home, particularly one in which the parents have never been married (not one resulting from death or divorce), has a detrimental impact on children and how they develop as adults. “Children in two-parent homes tend to live in homes with a higher level of income and have more time with their parents than do children from single-parent homes,” she writes. Nor is it just correlation. As Kearney explains, “data show sizable gaps in the outcomes of children who grow up with married versus unmarried mothers, even when the married and unmarried mothers are the same age and have the same levels of education.”

From Charles Murray to Robert Putnam, Thomas Sowell to Glenn Loury to Brad Wilcox, it’s hard to think of a serious book about the problems of income and racial inequality in America that hasn’t wrestled with the decline of the two-parent family. We should welcome to the fold anyone who has come around to this view. But Kearney’s diagnoses of the causes of these problems is incomplete, and what results is a prescription for change that is misguided and most likely ineffective.

LET’S START with the causes. The rise in nonmarital childbearing is first and foremost the result of changing social mores. The sexual revolution—including birth control, widely available abortions, and the disappearing stigma against bearing children out of wedlock—made single motherhood a real possibility for women. But what about the economics?

Kearney asserts in no uncertain terms that government payments did not contribute to the problem: “To argue...that the rising incidence of one-parent households in the U.S. has been driven by the availability of generous welfare benefits is simply untrue and unfounded.” She cites, among other evidence, that the welfare reform of the 1990s “did
not appreciably affect marriage and birth rates, and the prevalence of mother-only families has continued its steady upward climb, despite the legislation's wide-reaching changes.

The flaw in this analysis is that she is using evidence from a time far advanced from the moment the genie of single motherhood escaped from the bottle. Yes, it’s possible that tightening welfare requirements in the 1990s—trying to recall the government’s replacement of the man in the home—did nothing to improve the marriage rate. But it’s also possible that, by that point, social mores were so entrenched that nothing would fix the problem.

Weirdly, Kearney makes this point herself in a different context. Rather than welfare programs undermining marriage, men’s marriageability—their inability to earn a good living—is one of the reasons they are not marrying, she argues. But then she notes that increasing men’s earnings today doesn’t seem to have the effect she hoped. She cites a study she oversaw in a community that was affected by the fracking boom. Suddenly men in the area were able to earn a lot more money than they had before. While she and her colleagues found an increase in the overall birth rate—“when people experience an increase in income or wealth, they tend to have more children”—the increase in births occurred as much with unmarried parents as with married ones.” By contrast, during the 1970s Appalachian coal boom, more people got married and had kids inside marriages, but the number of births outside of marriage didn’t budge. By the time of the fracking boom 30 years later, everyone had accepted out-of-wedlock childbirth as perfectly acceptable. So why get married?

Perhaps because Kearney wants to stay out of the “culture wars,” she is unwilling to place any blame for current social mores on anyone in particular. There is no acknowledgement that the elites who are still getting hitched at virtually the same rate they were 50 years ago are the ones who promoted the expendability of marriage.

So how to fix this problem? If we do care about marriage because two-parent families promote better outcomes for children—not, heaven forbid, for any moral reason—is there anything we can do? Despite Kearney’s acknowledgement that neither the level of government spending nor private earning seems to move the needle very much on the likelihood that people will marry, she goes on to recommend “a massive infusion of federal resources into public universities and community colleges that educate and train millions of Americans each year.” She also recommends an expanded earned-income tax credit. She notes that “if we wish to promote marriage in the U.S., we should work to address the reasons why so many men seem to be less than ideal marriage partners.”

Similarly, Kearney recommends “criminal-justice reform” even as she acknowledges that many kids are actually better off when their parents are in jail. She cites one study showing that “children whose parents are incarcerated—due to a randomly assigned judge’s propensity to incarcerate convicted criminals—are substantially less likely to engage in criminal behavior before the age of 25.” Another study she cites shows higher educational attainment for kids whose fathers have been incarcerated (again due to randomly assigned judges). Removing criminals from the home has a good influence, and seeing a father imprisoned may actually have a deterrent effect.

But Kearney cannot help herself. Since there is a list of liberal prescriptions for the problems of disadvantaged people in the United States, she must offer them up even after explaining why those prescriptions won’t work.

Fair is fair: We don’t know what will work. But it is striking that Kearney never mentions the possibility of teaching kids the benefits of marriage. Perhaps simply opening up the conversation in the academy as far as she can go without finding herself exiled from academia.

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Everything Old Is New Again

Foreign Bodies: Pandemics, Vaccines, and the Health of Nations
By Simon Schama
Ecco, 480 pages

Reviewed by Bertie Bregman

I KNEW Covid was over when I started getting parking tickets again.

Throughout the pandemic, I went to work every day at Westside Family Medicine, our primary-care practice in New York City. I did telemedicine from the exam rooms and saw sick patients in the office or even in their homes when I thought I could keep them out of the emergency room. I parked anywhere I wanted, even in no-standing zones, and never got cited. My MD plates acted like a talisman in those early days before the vaccine, when people banged pots and pans from their windows in appreciation for medical workers.

Then, finally, came the vaccine, declining hospitalizations, heightened political rhetoric, and one day, a familiar orange envelope stuck under my windshield wiper. The worst was over.

So when is the best time to look back? And what is the best way to look back?

In his new book, Foreign Bodies: Pandemics, Vaccines, and the Health of Nations, Simon Schama, a prolific cultural historian and a professor of history and art history at Columbia University, gives as good an answer to that question as I've seen.

Schama organizes Foreign Bodies into three sections, one each on smallpox, cholera, and bubonic plague. He provides the reader with an overview of the historical period and cultural impact of each epidemic, along with colorful descriptions of both the disease and the medical personalities who developed and provided the vaccine against it.

We meet Voltaire, who came down with smallpox while visiting the country chateau of an aristocratic friend. He almost died and spent weeks in bed recuperating, only to repay his host's hospitality by accidentally burning the place down. Voltaire's enthusiasm for smallpox inoculation, which he saw as a sign of "Oriental" wisdom and English practicality and popularized in a series of essays, so incensed French chauvinists that he had to flee the country for his safety.

We meet Adrien Proust, the physician father of Marcel, whose extensive travel and study of cholera turned him into a major proponent of international inspection and cooperation, and who became one of the founding fathers of public health. Schama describes the elder Proust's journey to Tehran during a cholera outbreak:

Disembarking at the Russian-Persian border port of Atara, Proust hardly had time to get his ground legs back before swinging them over the saddle on which, following ancient caravan routes, he would cover the remaining 500 kilometers to Tehran. He was supplied with the usual necessities: an additional horse for the baggage; a rubber mat and thickly woven blanket for sleeping; a steel cup and cafetière; riding boots, thick and tough; concentrated alkali to encircle his tent and keep snakes at bay; insecticide for the mosquitoes and biting flies; and, not least, a revolver.

Contrast that with my traveling supplies for the two-mile commute back and forth from work every day during our epidemic: mask, cellphone, stethoscope, snack. How boring.

And finally, at the point where Schama really hits his stride, we meet Waldemar Haffkine. Haffkine was a fiery, radical, young Jewish revolutionary from Odessa, who also happened to be a brilliant microbiologist. That was lucky for him: More than once he had to rely on the influence of his university professor, the esteemed bacteriologist Metchnikoff, to save him from czarist prison. While Metchnikoff may not have approved of Haffkine's revolutionary activity, neither could he afford to lose him from the lab.

Haffkine was a giant in the history of vaccines. His rebellious nature served him well when it came to bucking scientific orthodoxies, and he innovated and refined techniques that led to major breakthroughs in inoculation against both cholera and bubonic plague.

His influence did not stop there. He was also a major figure in the distribution of vaccines, developing production methods at a scale that was completely unprecedented. At its peak, in 1903, Haffkine's Plague Research Laboratory, in Parel, India, was producing (by hand, mind you) more than a million doses of vaccine a month.

Equally significant as the fact
that Haffkine saved millions of lives, was to whom those lives belonged: mainly wretchedly poor farmers and villagers in remote areas of India. In trying to help these generally overlooked and neglected subjects of the British Empire, Haffkine battled against not only formidable medical, financial, and logistical challenges, but also the British Indian Medical Service.

Conservative, hierarchical, and rule-bound, the doctors and functionaries of the IMS tried to hinder and block Haffkine at every turn. And while Haffkine was at first successful at outmaneuvering them, the IMS eventually got its chance.

One day, a vial of vaccine became contaminated with tetanus, resulting in the tragic death of scores of villagers. Haffkine's enemies at the IMS pounced, attributing the disaster to shoddy production techniques and embarking on a vigorous, high-level campaign to discredit vaccination in general and destroy Haffkine's reputation in particular.

Despite the fact that the contamination was eventually proven to result not from the lab but from an accident in the field—when a worker dropped a syringe in the dirt and then continued to use it—the campaign mounted against Haffkine was ultimately successful. When it came to controversial medical procedures such as vaccination, where the battle is as much for hearts and minds as it is for scientific knowledge, there was even less margin for error back then than there is today.

In the end, Haffkine was formally vindicated, but he never regained his status or position. Due to the prominent role played in the scandal by anti-Semitism, the event became known as the “medical Dreyfus affair.”

Schama is deeply erudite and a great storyteller. And though he mentions it directly only in his introduction and conclusion, the COVID pandemic is a looming presence in his tale, with parallels coming to mind throughout.

For example, Schama's description of early cultural resistance to the paradoxical idea of vaccination itself—giving a person smallpox in order to prevent it? And to children, nonetheless?—makes it impossible not to reflect on the modern anti-vax movement but also on the parents in my exam room, who, while ready and willing to vaccinate themselves, balked when it came to inoculating their children. Whatever statistical justifications there were for this stance—and some were defensible, especially considering the almost non-existent death toll from Covid for children under the age of 18—they seemed in my daily experience to reflect an underlying visceral revulsion at the idea.

On the other side of the scale, once smallpox vaccination became accepted, popular, and even fashionable, there was no shortage of opportunists eager to exploit and monetize it. Schama tells the story of Robert Sutton, a 19th-century physician who turned smallpox vaccination into big business. He and his family opened Suttonian Inoculation Houses where, for a hefty fee, patients got room, board, and medical treatments. Not only would they receive inoculation, but with it a whole array of potions, salves, and remedies, all guaranteed to augment the effectiveness of the procedure (and all, as you might imagine, totally bogus).

The story of Sutton evoked the Covid-testing tents and specialized Covid labs that popped up like mushrooms all over America, reaping tens of millions of dollars by exploiting loopholes in government regulation that allowed them to extort exorbitant payments from insurance companies.

Schama outlines a dichotomy in the approach to epidemics that has its roots in the 19th-century: inoculation vs. quarantine. On the vaccine side were figures like Haffkine. On the quarantine side were the stalwarts of the IMS and other prominent members of the medical establishment. Both sides had a good argument. Vaccines were proving to protect the individual organism while quarantine was an ancient, tried-and-true practice that limited the spread of disease. But the conflict was fierce, with each camp taking an all-or-nothing approach and demonizing the other.

It’s interesting to note how this schism developed over time. Today, of course, we practice both inoculation and quarantine, with inoculation generally having the upper hand. To wit: Social distancing and masking mostly fell by the wayside once the Covid vaccine was released.

Sometimes, the parallels can seem a bit forced. In his conclusion, Schama makes a direct analogy between Haffkine and Anthony Fauci. He views them both as men of science and humanitarians, harnessed by the forces of reaction and superstition and undermined by politics and prejudice.

The comparison breaks down under scrutiny. Haffkine was struggling against the medical orthodoxy, while Fauci was mostly opposed by scientific outliers and lay people. It's like the difference between a young Picasso being thrown out of the academy and a mature Picasso being dismissed by philistines saying, “My kid can draw better than that!” Fauci had it ridiculously easy compared with Haffkine, who ended up ostracized by many of his peers and saw his career and livelihood come to ruins.

Still, in Foreign Bodies, Schama finds more in the past to teach readers about Covid than anything written about Covid in the present. As usual, Churchill put it best: “The longer you can look back, the further you can see forward.”

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 48  making pots of money in the theaters only made it worse for them.

One of the two screenwriters of the movie is Rod Barr. He happens to be an old friend of mine. He and I have been on the board of a homeless youth agency in Hollywood for nearly two decades. And as I read more and more about *Sound of Freedom*, it seemed less and less like something my friend Rod would have put his name on. So I pulled an Alvy Singer and called him up.

“Congratulations on the movie! But I had no idea you were into QAnon stuff, Rod,” I said helpfully.

He sighed.

“I'm kidding,” I said.

“Look,” he said. “Here's how the movie happened. Alejandro Monteverde, the director and co-writer of this script with me, came to me in about 2015 and said he had just seen a piece on *60 Minutes* or something about child-trafficking and it rocked his soul. And he said we should write something about this. And then we were introduced to Tim Ballard as research for this fictional thing, and it turned out that Tim's true story was much better than ours. So that's when we decided to tell Tim's story.”

Me: “And the St. Timothy medallion? The part that's sort of Roman Catholic-ish?”

Rod: “We didn't make that up! That's real! We were trying to tell an important story, but we were also trying to make a good movie, a movie that would pull people in. Structurally, it's a rescue-the-princess story, right? A hero story.”

Me: “So why did everyone freak out? If they made this exact movie with, say, Matt Damon in the Jim Caviezel role and it was distributed by Warners or Universal or someone—”

Rod: “And they all used to make movies like this, all of them!”

Me: “Right. But if they make *Sound of Freedom* with a different creative team, same movie, same everything, no one would have called it the QAnon Movie. Why is that?”

Rod was silent for a moment. “My wife's a mediator,” he said, “and a really good one, and she deals with this all the time in litigation and mediation, when sides are entrenched. And there's this thing called reactive devaluation that she talks about a lot. And it's essentially that if the other side believes it, it must be wrong. Even if it's not wrong, even if it's true, it must be wrong.”

“In other words,” I said, “conservatives and religious people are deeply concerned about child sex-trafficking, so they must be wrong, it must not be a problem?”

“Exactly,” Rod said. “It's human nature, I guess. But it's so weird because I'm not even a conservative! I'm Roman Catholic, but I'm center-left, as you know.”

“I didn't know,” I told him. “Which is strange, right? We've been friends for years and we haven't ever talked about politics. Or faith.”

“At first, I rejected the whole ‘faith-based’ label,” he said. “I would tell everyone, 'Hey, when we make a faith-based movie, you'll know it.' But now I figure, instead of trying to get around a label that's going to happen anyway, just embrace it and say, 'Let's make faith part of our cultural discussion.'”

“Also,” I reminded him, “your next movie is literally about a nun.”

*Cabrini*, which opens in March 2024, is about Mother Cabrini, the first American to achieve sainthood. She began her work in the slums of New York, helping recent Italian immigrants, and eventually built an empire of service organizations that spanned seven continents. I've seen the trailer for the movie, and it looks great. John Lithgow, in particular, plays a terrifically villainous character. But still, it's about a nun.

“They don't make movies about nuns in Hollywood,” Rod said.

“They used to,” I said. “I mean, Julie Andrews in *Sound of Music*?”

“Right!” Rod said. “And Sally Field was *The Flying Nun*. And Whoopi Goldberg was a kinda-nun in *Sister Act*.”

“Nuns are so divisive,” I said.

Rod laughed. “You know what I think? I think as a country we've never been more divided than we are now, but we're a lot less divided than people think.”

As I said, *Sound of Freedom* has made $190 million domestically and is on track to make at least as much in the international market, which suggests that Rod is correct. There's a big, underserved audience out there made up of folks who will go see *Barbie* and the latest *Avengers* movie but who also want something else, something if not faith-based than at least faith-adjacent.

Boy, if life were only like this. And there are 190 million reasons why it might soon be.
Why Sound of Freedom Is a Phenomenon

ROB LONG

There’s a classic moment in Annie Hall when Alvy Singer, Woody Allen’s hapless character, is stuck in line at the movies in front of a pompous, bloviating know-it-all holding forth about the work of Marshall McLuhan. Exasperated and annoyed, Alvy reaches off-screen and produces, in the flesh, a very real Marshall McLuhan, who dresses the mansplainer down. “You know nothing of my work,” McLuhan says. “Boy, if life were only like this,” says Alvy Singer into the camera.

Our time together in this column, yours and mine, will be like that McLuhan moment. But first some background:

This summer two of the most eagerly anticipated movies—another installment of the Mission: Impossible series and a final farewell to the Indiana Jones character—fizzled at the box office despite having everything going for them. Even more striking, both of these expensive, high-profile pictures were bested by a movie that cost about $14 million and has, so far, earned about $190 million in the domestic market. That movie, Sound of Freedom, is a classic action-thriller about a disillusioned American special agent named Tim Ballard who quits his job at the Department of Homeland Security and masterminds a rogue operation to smash an international child-sex-trafficking ring. It seems like pretty down-the-middle fare, to be honest—a little bit Taken, a little bit Jack Ryan, in which a hero bucks the system to follow his intuition and save the innocent. This has been a reliable formula for box-office success since...well, since the invention of the box office. But Sound of Freedom has certain, um, peculiarities that make it an outsider kind of picture.

In the first place, the main character is a devout Roman Catholic, which makes him seem weird to a lot of people who write about movies for a living, despite the fact that there are about 62 million Roman Catholics in America. In one scene, he gives one of the at-risk kids his St. Timothy medallion for safekeeping, which is about the most Roman Catholic moment of the movie.

But that moment, and the Christian focus of the distribution company, Angel Studios, was enough to brand Sound of Freedom a “faith-based” movie. “Faith-based” is the euphemism employed by left-wing media types when they want to throw a little shade at a project. “Faith-based” means religious, which indicates Christian, and which implies nutty fundamentalist Evangelical Jesus-y conservative stuff.

Of course, it didn’t help that the star of the movie, Jim Caviezel, famously played Jesus Christ in Mel Gibson’s famously gory The Passion of the Christ, and that in the ensuing years Caviezel has gone more than a little QAnon in his political beliefs. In some of the press events for Sound of Freedom, Caviezel was thought to have been making larger claims about the very real issue of child sex-trafficking. Claims that involve pizza restaurants in Washington, D.C.; offshore facilities for the harvesting of something called adrenochrome; and (of course!) Hillary Clinton.

The movie premiered on July 4, and it quickly became known as That QAnon Movie to people who wanted to find a reason to dismiss it. Those people included the usual media liberals but also a lot of folks in Hollywood—for whom the 200 million Americans who describe themselves as Christian and the 30 percent of Americans who go to church regularly are an impenetrable mystery. That the movie was also

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

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Can Biden’s Plan Beat Antisemitism?

President Biden’s new Strategy to Counter Antisemitism got good press: But now we need courageous action to fight rising Jew hatred on our streets and campuses.

The Administration’s National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism arrived just as attacks against Jews—and especially Jewish students—are surging. However, does Mr. Biden have the commitment to combat antisemites from all corners of American society?

What are the facts?

A Jewish center in Detroit is vandalized. Colorado students wear body-painted swastikas after a Holocaust program. Pro-Palestinian activists beat a Jewish man on a New York street. An Illinois man threatens Jewish organizations. A commencement speaker at CUNY Law School slanders the Jewish state—students and faculty cheer.

Though Jews are only 2.4% of the U.S. population, they are the victims of 63% of religiously motivated hate crimes. Antisemitic incidents rose by 36% to a new high of 3,697 in 2022. Moreover, bullying and intimidation of Jewish students on college campuses tripled last year, while attempts to censor Zionism increased 600%, according to AMCHA Initiative.

Recalling Jewish plight in Nazi Germany, some 50% of U.S. Jewish students say they hide their Jewish identity, according to a Brandeis Center study.

Will the President back his National Strategy with courageous opposition—no matter who the offenders are? The President’s National Strategy promises four pillars of action to combat Jew hatred: 1) Increase awareness and understanding 2) Improve safety and security. 3) Reverse the normalization of antisemitism. 4) Build solidarity and counter hate. In addition, the Biden Strategy adopts the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism—endorsed by 1,116 entities globally and 30 U.S. states.

While these principles establish a foundation for fighting Jew hatred, this battle demands more than nice words. Will Mr. Biden have the courage to oppose antisemitism across the spectrum of offenders—whether politically right or left, no matter race or ethnicity, Republicans or Democrats? Such evenhanded justice will be the true test of the President’s commitment.

Aggressively prosecute and condemn campus antisemitism. Antisemitism on college campuses spans a range of hatred—from vandalism . . . to demonization of Israel and bias against students who support the Jewish state. Many of these offenses violate Title IV of the Civil Rights Act. To increase awareness of such antisemitism, the Administration must prosecute them aggressively. In addition, when students or faculty deliver antisemitic speeches—such as several recent commencement addresses—members of the Administration, including the President, must condemn them.

Make American streets safe for Orthodox Jews. Though antisemitic crimes occur all across our country, certain communities are particularly vulnerable. According to a 2022 report by Americans Against Antisemitism, Orthodox Jews in New York City are the minority group most victimized by hate crimes in the city. Shockingly, fully 97% of the crimes between 2018 and 2022 were committed by members of other minority groups. Not only must the Administration demand escalated policing and prosecution to protect all Jews, but it should fund education targeted to groups who perpetrate these crimes.

Reverse the normalization of antisemitism—in the classroom and in Congress. Under the guise of “ethnic studies,” students at all levels are being indoctrinated to believe falsely that Jewish people are “white oppressors” and that Israel is a colonial state. These beliefs disregard millennia of antisemitic persecution—specifically because Jews were not considered “white”—and it ignores Jews’ 3000-year struggle against colonial powers in the land of Israel. In addition, some members of Congress increasingly stigmatize Jews with antisemitic tropes about undue Jewish influence and demonize the Jewish state with false accusations of apartheid—antisemitic under the IHRA definition. The Administration must reverse such Jew-hatred—by defunding antisemitic ethnic studies programs and denouncing hateful statements by elected officials.

Build solidarity to counter Palestinian hate. The majority of American Jews—and Americans generally—support the Jewish state. Yet how can the Administration oppose antisemitism when it gives generous financial support to people who teach their children to kill Jews? According to the most recent research by the Anti-Defamation League—ADL Global 100 Index—some 93% of Palestinians harbor antisemitic beliefs, the highest score of any people worldwide. Worse, the Biden Administration has given the Palestinians more than $1 billion—with no requirement they reduce Jew hatred or the murder of innocent Jews. The Administration must back its commitment by defunding openly antisemitic groups.

If the Biden Administration is serious about combating antisemitism, it must act against the most visible forms of Jew hatred. That means stepped up prosecution on campus and on our streets, outspoken criticism of all who commit antisemitism—no matter social, racial or political identity—plus immediate defunding of groups that actively traffic in antisemitic behavior.

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P.O. Box 3460, Berkeley, CA 94703
James Sinkinson, President
Gerardo Joffe (z”l), Founder
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