'Then came Amalek, and fought with Israel'

–Exodus 17:8

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Saving lives. It’s in our blood.
In 1941, George Orwell noted: “As I write, highly civilized human beings are flying overhead, trying to kill me.” Well, as I write, in November 2023, highly uncivilized human beings are flying over and climbing under and running on foot and paragliding into the country of my sister and her children and her grandchildren and my people, trying to kill them.

When I call the Jews of Israel “my people,” I am saying something very specific—something factual, not emotional. I am not a sentimentalist. I do not believe people are all brothers, and I do not believe all Jews are brothers. A Jew who ceases speaking the prayer for the State of Israel at his synagogue because he doesn’t like the politics of the people in charge is not my brother. A Jew who mocks other Jews whose deeply held beliefs restrict their diet and their clothing and their cosmopolitanism is not my brother. A Jew who treats Judaism itself as though it is a piece of clothing to be donned and doffed at will is not my brother.

All that said, had we lived 80 years ago under different circumstances, these people who are not my brothers could all have been on a cattle car with me on our way to a chamber where we could have been gassed with Zyklon-B. Fifty years ago, had we but the athletic skill, we could have been taken hostage in Munich and then slaughtered. Today, as I write, brother or no, we could have all been slaughtered in our beds, or burned in our cars, our babies beheaded, our relatives kidnapped.

And all for the same reason, every time, and every time throughout history.

These are my people to some degree because so many others, civilized and barbaric and every shade in between, see us as the same and want to see us and our parents and our siblings and our children dead.

But that is not what defines “my people” for me. In secular terms, much of what I believe on this score is what Orwell believed about the English people he defended against the universalist nonsense of his day: “Above all, it is your civilization, it is you. However much you hate it or laugh at it...good or evil, it is yours, you belong to it, and this side the grave you will never get away from the marks that it has given you.”

And it goes beyond the secular. Israelis are coming together as never before and will be fighting this war with a clarifying determination because the Jews have ingathered again and, as Golda Meir said, “we have nowhere else to go.” Jews are here, Jews are still here, and Jews are still going to be here—because these people who do not want us to be here will go the way of all flesh while our ancient people remain and survive and thrive.

On Passover we say: In every generation they rise up to destroy us. And while we continue with the words: and the Holy One, blessed be He, stays their hand, we must always help Him out. The first enemy of the newly constituted nation of Israel was Amalek. Exodus 17:8 provides the first account of the defeat of an enemy of the Jews. And it is the direct result of Moses’s discovery that if he held up his hand and kept it up, no matter what and no matter how long it might take, the tide of battle would turn toward the Israelites.

As Moses’s hand was raised, the hand of Israel is raised now. —John Podhoretz
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To the Editor:

I AM THE DAUGHTER of David Hawkins, who is mentioned in your magazine by Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes (“Oppenheimer Was a Communist,” September). The following is what I know.

My father believed, and stated repeatedly, that Oppenheimer was not a Communist Party member. His knowledge was based on his own membership until early 1940, when he quit over Communist-Nazi collaboration in the Low Countries. So the authors’ account of my father’s understanding of Oppenheimer is different from what I was told. That doesn’t mean that the authors’ conclusions are wrong, but it does suggest that they may have polished the complex evidence, at least once. If Klehr and Haynes are correct, my father may simply not have known of Oppenheimer’s connection to the party.

I can also remember my father’s comments about CPUSA events being held at Oppenheimer’s house. He said that the party sometimes “sponsored” such events, mainly to benefit Loyalist Spain. They typically invited members, fellow travelers, and others who were just interested. I guess everyone, even loyal Communists, liked attending cocktail parties in an upscale house.

I should add that my father was Oppenheimer’s assistant at Los Alamos and wrote a wartime history of the Manhattan Project. He is not portrayed in the film, nor are other key figures, such as Victor Weisskopf and Stanislaus Ulam. That said, it was an excellent movie. I remember Niels Bohr from after the war, and Kenneth Branagh did a magnificent job portraying him.

Julie Hawkins Melton
Santa Fe, New Mexico

Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes write:

WE THANK JULIE Hawkins Melton for her letter. Nothing her father told her, however, contradicts the evidence in our article that Robert Oppenheimer had been a member of the CPUSA. We wrote that he had been a member of a secret party faculty unit, consisting of himself, Haakon Chevalier, and Arthur Brodeur. Their liaison with the Communist Party was Gordon Griffiths, a graduate student in the history department. Both Chevalier and Griffiths identi-
fied Oppenheimer as a participant in the unit. So did Chevalier’s wife. As far as we can tell, Brodeur never discussed his party membership, and Oppenheimer denied it. The unit was secret, and Hawkins, a graduate student in philosophy, was not a member.

We noted in our article that Hawkins “could not confirm that Oppenheimer was a party member but agreed that Oppenheimer had hosted CPUSA meetings at his home.” We agree with Melton that her “father may simply not have known of Oppenheimer’s connection to the party.” She also claims that the party occasionally sponsored parties—mainly fundraisers for Loyalist Spain—at Oppenheimer’s elegant house to which many non-Communists were invited. Interviewed years later by Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin, Oppenheimer’s sympathetic biographers, Hawkins agreed he was not aware of whether Oppenheimer was a party member but confessed that he had attended Communist study groups—not fundraisers for Loyalist Spain—at Oppenheimer’s home.

The evidence that Oppenheimer had been a party member is overwhelming and does not rest on David Hawkins’s recollections.

Biden and Israel

To the Editor:

MIKE POMPEO and Elan Carr’s article on Joe Biden and Israel was 100 percent spot on, (“The Biden Turn Against Israel,” September). The authors, however, leave out something important.

As Pompeo and Carr note, the
Biden administration recently rolled out its National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism. At the time, President Biden made it a point to express his rightful animosity toward white nationalism. But as with many Democrats, Biden’s focusing on white nationalism misses the fastest growing form of antisemitism in America: anti-Zionism.

When I read the strategy, I noticed something appalling. There was not a single mention of either Zionism or anti-Zionism—in a strategy purportedly meant to combat anti-Semitism. When anti-Zionism is the most prevalent form of anti-Semitism on college and university campuses? How could that be? The strategy references Islamophobia 21 times. And there are as many references to halal as there are to kosher. Given that—in the strategy’s own words—anti-Semitism has “unique characteristics,” it came as a surprise to read the phrase “other forms of hate/bigotry” 43 times. But Zionism and anti-Zionism? Not a single reference.

Why? Because the National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism is a National Strategy to Counter White Nationalism. If you read it and insert “white nationalism” for “anti-Semitism,” the plan stays the same. This is intentional. Deborah Lipstadt, Doug Emhoff, and everyone else connected to this strategy purposely created it as a smoke-screen for the anti-Semites on their side of the aisle. It allows some progressives—most notably Pramila Jayapal, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib, Bernie Sanders, Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, and Hakeem Jeffries to skirt accusations of antisemitism.

It takes a spine of steel to fight anti-Semitism precisely because it exists on your side of the political aisle—no matter what side that is. You must have the strength to alienate your own.

Yes, anti-Semitism exists on the right, and it needs to be called out. But it also exists on the left. Indeed, the left is building a culture predicated on the lie that anti-Zionism is not anti-Semitism.

JAKE DONNELLY
DIRECTOR, JEWISH LEADERSHIP PROJECT
Swampscott, Massachusetts

To the Editor:

MICHAEL R. Pompeo and Elan S. Carr offer a number of disturbing examples of the Biden administration’s tilt against Israel. Allow me to add one more.

Some have noted that the administration often criticizes Israel for building in the portions of Judea-Samaria that it governs, yet it never criticizes the Palestinian Authority for building in the parts of those territories that it governs. That double standard is bad enough, but the deeper significance of the U.S. position is worse than that.

There is not one word in the Oslo Accords, or any other peace agreements that Israel has ever signed with any Arab regime, that prohibits Jewish construction in the territories. Building new towns, expanding existing towns, and construction within the current borders of towns there, is all perfectly consistent with the Oslo agreements.

So when the Biden administration demands that Israel halt construction (or “settlement activity”), it is demanding that Israel go above and beyond its obligations in the Oslo Accords. But the administration never demands that the Palestinian Authority even fulfill its obligations in those accords, much less go beyond them. The PA has never disarmed or outlawed terrorist groups, extradited terrorists to...
Israel, or halted its anti-Jewish incitement. It has not even produced a copy of the amended Palestinian National Covenant, from which it supposedly removed passages calling for violence and the destruction of Israel.

The U.S. invested deeply in the Oslo Accords. It embraced the agreements, hosted the Rabin-Arafat signing on the White House lawn, trained and armed the Palestinian security forces, and poured more than $10 billion into the PA. It’s unconscionable that the Biden administration refuses to insist that the PA honor the accords, while condemning Israel for doing something that the accords permit.

Stephen M. Flatow
President, Religious Zionists of America
New York City

Michael R. Pompeo and Elan S. Carr write:

STEPHEN M. FLATOW bolsters our thesis by pointing out yet another way in which the Biden administration makes unreasonable demands of Israel while indulging Palestinian malfeasance. Whatever one believes about potential Israeli territorial concessions, settlements are neither illegal nor an obstacle to peace, and during the previous administration we established U.S. policy along those lines. More broadly, the left’s identity-based branding of Palestinians as perpetual victims of racist oppression does them no favors. Those who genuinely care about Palestinians ought to start by respecting their human agency.

With regard to the Biden National Strategy to Counter Antisemitism, we opted to focus on its sins of commission, rather than omission; however, Jake Donnelly is correct in lamenting its neglect of anti-Zionism, which is one of today’s prevalent manifestations of anti-Semitism. Where the strategy does acknowledge the existence of Israel-hatred, it neglects to outline measures that address it. For example, after correctly affirming that singling out Israel because of anti-Jewish hatred is anti-Semitic, it suggests no responsive measures. And even in the section aiming to address anti-Semitism in schools and on campus, the strategy sets forth no actions to counter the drumbeat of anti-Zionism plaguing our educational systems. When one of us, as secretary of state, declared in 2019, “let me go on record: anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism,” the statement was meant to set forth U.S. policy along straightforward guidelines: Hatred of the Jewish state is hatred of the Jewish people, and denying the Jewish people its identity as an ethno-national community with rights of self-determination in its ancestral homeland is a form of anti-Semitism.

Stalin and the Jews

To the Editor:

I WAS COMPLETELY captivated by Dovid Margolin’s article on the Jews killed in Soviet Russia. Margolin must have done extensive research to discover all of the facts about his great-grandfather, Solomon Levenson, and I am amazed at what he was able to uncover. While I was aware that hundreds of thousands of Russians were killed under the Stalinist regime, I was unaware of Kommunarka, Butovo, and Stalin’s shooting grounds. The essay was wonderfully written, and by the end I felt I knew Solomon, Dasha, and his grandmother Olga, who was fortunate to have survived.

My family was fortunate in that they fled the Soviet Union in 1918, when my uncle was marked for execution by the Communists (a long story in itself).

“The Jews in Defiance of History” was the right headline. With the killings of millions of Jews over the past 2,500 years it is indeed a miracle that our people not only survived but are today thriving in our ancient homeland and speaking our ancient language. It is
inconceivable that this miracle was anything other than by the work of Hashem.

As the Haggadah states, “In every generation they (our enemies) rise up against us to destroy us but the Holy One Blessed Be He saves us from their hands.”

I thank Dovid Margolin for painting such a vivid picture of what took place in the Soviet Union in the 1930s.

Yaakov Aminoff
Indian Land, South Carolina

Dovid Margolin writes:

I WANT TO THANK Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili and Yaakov Aminoff for their very kind words. I should note that my research would have been impossible without the groundbreaking work of the Russian human-rights organization Memorial. Beginning in 1989, Memorial-affiliated scholars painstakingly uncovered and published the names of millions of Stalin’s victims, and it is to their credit that families such as mine were able to learn the truth. My understanding of the mechanics of Stalin’s shooting grounds is likewise thanks primarily to the work of Arseny Roginsky, the former Soviet dissident who chaired Memorial from 1998 until his death in 2017. The ban on Memorial is another example of Russia’s tragic inability to face its past.

The Jewish people, on the other hand, have throughout history endeavored to live up to the Almighty’s injunction that we “Remember,” as Yaakov Aminoff illustrates when he quotes the Haggadah. For the Jews, remembrance is never just about the past, but also for our present.

The Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, understood intimately the depravity of Soviet crimes. This year will mark 80 years since his father, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson, died ill and emaciated in government-imposed exile in Kazakhstan. The Rebbe, however, did not recall his father as a victim, but as the victor—one who through daily acts of self-sacrifice for Judaism revealed God’s presence in the deepest darkness.

“The Jewish people must survive … Bolshevism,” the Rebbe told a Soviet Jewry activist in 1977. Dancing once a year on Simchat Torah was not enough; in order to survive and thrive as Jews they must engage with their Judaism “every day!” This is in effect what Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili expresses when she points out that the Jews’ practice of “their faith seems always to be an act of great defiance.” It is our ultimate act of defiance.
THE SIMCHAS TORAH pogrom upended politics in America no less than in Israel. Prior to October 7, the Democratic Party benefited from consistent leadership at the White House and in Congress, and from consensus on major foreign-policy questions such as aid to Ukraine. The Republicans, by contrast, had for the first time overthrown a speaker of the House of Representatives mid-Congress. What remained of the party establishment struggled to maintain a pro-Ukraine consensus within the GOP. Internal division and angst plagued Republicans. Democrats were fat and happy and more than a little complacent.

Not anymore. While the Biden administration and bipartisan congressional leadership denounced Hamas’s atrocities and pledged support for Israel’s defense, the Democratic response was not unanimous. Dissident voices indulged in moral equivalence between Israel and Hamas. They suggested or stated outright that the murder and kidnapping of hundreds of civilians was a justified response to years of Israeli “occupation.” They called for a cease-fire before Israel was finished burying its dead. Their ghoulish defense of the indefensible was a reminder: The U.S.-Israel alliance now divides Democrats as much as it unites Republicans.

This dynamic will hinder the president. Joe Biden will have to confront accusations from within his own party that he is fueling “Bibi’s war.” Containing the anti-Israel caucus and providing Israel the space to win the war will be hard. Biden is a politician, not a statesman. His primary interest is self-preservation and enrichment through domestic affairs. Practically all his foreign-policy instincts are wrong. He will back Israel, for sure. Right up to the moment it becomes inconvenient.

We know who will lead the charge against U.S. support. Among the worst legacies of Donald Trump’s presidency was the rise of the far-left “Squad” of Democratic House members. The Squad is small—just eight people at this writing, five of whom belong to the Democratic Socialists of America. That is less than 4 percent of the House Democratic caucus. Yet the Squad enjoys outsized leverage.

Why? Because these Millennial Jacobins are experts at manipulating celebrity and the postmodern attention economy. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York uses social media and public outrage to extend the reach of her noxious politics. Her colleagues follow her lead.

Representative Ilhan Omar of Minnesota revels in the controversy that surrounds her anti-Semitic tropes. Representative Jamaal Bowman of New York fundraises off such antics as pulling fire alarms to keep votes open and labeling Republicans as Nazis—a slur that he does not apply to the actual Nazis in Hamas.

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.
violating norms and pushing the rhetorical envelope, the Squad introduces radical anti-Israel and anti-American ideas into the body politic. It forces mainstream Democrats to appease the left.

The speed with which the socialist lawmakers criticized Israel, even as the Jewish state reeled from the worst terror attack in its history, was breathtaking as well as nauseating. In separate press releases, Ocasio-Cortez and fellow Squad member Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts demanded an “immediate ceasefire and de-escalation.” Omar said the same. Bowman introduced a twist: The barbarism unleashed on Israel, he said, was another example of the “deadly violence that is killing and traumatizing generations of Israelis and Palestinians alike—including the blockade of Gaza.”

Only the dimmest and morally confused mind could equate the slaughter of children with an economic embargo against a genocidal regime.

Worse yet was Squad member Cori Bush of Missouri. “As part of achieving a just and lasting peace,” she posted on X, “we must do our part to stop this violence and trauma by ending U.S. government support for Israeli military occupation and apartheid.” Not to be outdone, the vile Rashida Tlaib of Michigan wrote on Instagram that America and Israel are behind the “apartheid system” that “creates the suffocating, de-humanizing conditions that can lead to resistance.” Resistance, mind you. Not terrorism, depravity, or animalistic savagery. Resistance.

Blaming Jews for their own victimization is anti-Semitism in action. Such hatred emanating from the U.S. Congress would have been inconceivable even a decade ago. Today, it is par for the course. True, anti-Semitism has not taken over the Democratic Party. But that fact is hardly reassuring.

After all, we live in a representative democracy where public attitudes manifest themselves in elected officials. The growth of the Squad, along with a couple of bigoted and delusional Republican congressmen, is evidence of the new anti-Semitism in America. Assaults on Orthodox Jews, the attacks by gunmen on Jewish houses of worship and study, rallies by neo-Nazis in California and Florida, virulent hostility to the U.S.-Israel relationship and to Israel’s right to self-defense—these are different faces of the same evil.

The trouble for Democrats is that many parts of their coalition indulge in and apologize for the madness. Earlier this year, the Gallup organization found that for the first time, more Democrats sympathized with Palestinians than Israelis. Chapters of the Democratic Socialists of America organized pro-Palestinian rallies throughout the United States, including one rally in New York City where a participant waved a phone displaying a swastika. If the young people waving Palestinian flags and denouncing Israel vote, it’s not for the GOP.

Universities throughout the country issued statements on the war in Israel that were at best temporizing and at worst hostile to Jewish security abroad and at home. Black Lives Matter expressed solidarity with the Palestinians. And Democratic leaders, including President Biden, still cater to the likes of Al Sharpton despite his anti-Jewish past. Just as the “America First” right undermines assistance to Ukraine and America’s role as leader of the Free World, the anti-Israel left subverts another foundation of American exceptionalism: our historic commitment to the safety of the Jewish homeland.

Which puts President Biden in an uncomfortable spot. Until now, he has used Republican scepticism of, and growing opposition to, Ukraine funds to rally his side against Russia. He has no problem with Republicans calling Ukraine a “liberal war.” It puts him on the side of freedom and democracy, where most Americans are already. He’s maneuvered the right into the anti-internationalist camp while preserving his left flank.

Before long, though, Biden will oversee a multi-front offensive: not just in Ukraine and in the Middle East, but also within America’s major political parties. Will he withstand the pressure from the global left, its mouthpieces in the media, youth on college campuses, and Democratic peaceniks? Or will his interest fade along with his resolve? Historical precedent does not inspire confidence in his ability.

Biden’s best option is to accept the reality that the world is at war. Russia, China, and Iran are working to displace American preeminence and the liberal democratic world order that America sustains. Russia and China have a “no limits” partnership. Russia and Iran trade arms and aid. Russia invades Ukraine; Iran’s proxy Hamas invades Israel; and the coming years may see China invade Taiwan or launch a naval war against the Philippines, a U.S. treaty ally.

It is up to Biden to connect the dots for the American people and persuade them that Ukraine, Israel, and the South China Sea are different theaters in a single conflict over who will write the rules of the 21st century. He can defeat the fringe by increasing defense spending, revitalizing the defense industrial base, and elevating the next generation of pro-Israel Democrats, such as Representatives Ritchie Torres, Seth Moulton, and Jake Auchincloss.

But he needs to move quickly. For every hour he delays, the anti-Israel toxin seeps deeper into the backbone of the Democratic Party.
IN THE IMMEDIATE aftermath of the horrific invasion of Israel on October 7, it was clear to any sane observer that Hamas could not have managed to pull off such a complicated attack on its own. Indeed, within two days, a Hamas spokesman told the BBC that Iran had given its support to the attack—not a surprise, considering that Iran has long been a state sponsor of Hamas terrorism, and of that committed by Israel’s terrorist neighbor to the north, Hezbollah. The Wall Street Journal followed up with a more detailed accounting of Iran’s involvement, noting, “Iranian security officials helped plan Hamas’s Saturday surprise attack on Israel and gave the green light for the assault at a meeting in Beirut last Monday, according to senior members of Hamas and Hezbollah.”

It is thus not odd to ask, as many Americans did on social-media platforms, whether the recent announcement by the Biden administration that it had freed up $6 billion for Iran in exchange for the release of five American hostages might not have been the wisest move.

The Biden administration adamantly rejected any such questioning. Deputy White House press secretary Andrew Bates posted on Twitter/X, “Shameful lies when supporting Israel should be the focus. Fact: 0 taxpayer $[.] Fact: No Iranian $ spent yet[.] Fact: When spent, Iranian money can only be used by private actors to provably buy food and medicine[.] No reporter should spread this misinformation without fact checking.”

National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson also chimed in: “These funds have absolutely nothing to do with the horrific attacks today and this is not the time to spread disinformation.” And State Department spokesman Matthew Miller added, “Not a penny has been spent, and when it is, it can only go for humanitarian needs like food and medicine. Anything to the contrary is false.”

As it often does, the New York Times editorial board dutifully carried water for the administration’s spin. After tut-tutting Israel for engaging in inappropriate “collective punishment” by cutting off electricity to Gaza, the Times added: “Some Republican presidential candidates tried to put some blame for the attack on the administration’s recent decision to release $6 billion in blocked Iranian funds in exchange for the release of five Americans detained in Iran. This is a distraction. There is no evidence those funds could have inspired or facilitated the Hamas attack, and these claims do not help Israel’s defense.”

While the $6 billion might not have been cashed and spent by Hamas yet, even Secretary of State Antony Blinken had to admit on NBC News on October 8 that such behavior was a likely possibility in the future. Asked about the argument that the money is fungible, and that, knowing an infusion of $6 billion was on the way, Iran could have diverted existing resources to Hamas, Blinken said, “Iran has unfortunately always used and focused its funds on supporting terrorism.”

Indeed, as the Washington Free Beacon’s indefatigable Iran reporter Adam Kredo has documented, the Biden administration has long known that money

Christine Rosen is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.
given to Iran and to the Palestinians was frequently diverted to Hamas, a designated terrorist group. A 2021 State Department memo obtained by the Beacon revealed that Biden's State Department sought an exemption from the Treasury Department so that it could release $360 million to the Palestinians. The exemption was needed because “we assess there is a high risk Hamas could potentially derive indirect, unintentional benefit from U.S. assistance to Gaza.”

Why then are administration officials falsely claiming it is “disinformation” when Republican politicians and the public ask about the risks taken by the Biden-administration regarding Iran? As Eli Lake noted in the Free Press, the Biden administration should be reckoning with “the fact that it has done a deal with Hamas's most powerful and important patron.”

The mainstream press has been reluctant to pursue such a reckoning. Why?

One clue can be found in how the media handled another recent Biden administration scandal regarding Iran: the case of Robert Malley, a boyhood friend of Blinken and the Biden administration's special envoy to Iran. He is currently under investigation by the FBI after being placed on leave for supposedly mishandling classified material. Thanks to the reporting of Kredo at the Beacon, as well as an investigation by Jay Solomon at Semafor, we know that Malley was an eager participant in an Iranian influence scheme that spanned years and revealed high-ranking officials in Biden's State and Defense Departments toadying up to the Iran regime.

Malley was no doubt cultivated by Iran because of his well-known enthusiasm for Hamas, with whom he’d met on numerous occasions. His apologies for this brutal terrorist organization were so clearly questionable that Barack Obama removed him as an adviser to his 2008 campaign (only to bring him back as his Iran “czar” after he won). In a 2008 interview, Malley urged people to see Hamas not just “in terms of their terrorist-violence dimension.” He said, “There’s so much misinformation about them. None of them are crazies. They may do things that we consider to belong to a different realm of rationality, but within their own system it’s often very logical.”

This is the person whom both Obama and Biden have entrusted with crafting American policy toward Iran. And yet the New York Times reported on Malley's suspension with an anodyne story that claimed he “seemed to be playing a less prominent role in U.S. policy to Iran in recent months.” There have been no further investigative stories by Times reporters. Likewise, the Washington Post merely rehearsed Malley’s résumé in a story about his being placed on leave. It is not difficult to imagine that reporters would call this far worse than disturbing had such a clear-cut influence operation hatched by one of America's enemies been uncovered during Donald Trump’s (or any Republican) administration.

The press's credulousness about the Biden administration's deeply misguided policy toward Iran is understandable within the broader context of its reporting, however: It's impossible not to get the sense that, particularly since Biden's disastrous withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, the mainstream media are highly reluctant to report on foreign-policy messes. Biden's approval ratings never recovered from that debacle, and that was partly because the press couldn't ignore it. Mainstream media outlets have slow-walked or ignored many negative stories since (the crisis at the southern border in particular), perhaps having seen just how profound an impact such stories can have on President Biden's reelection hopes.

Reporting thoroughly and honestly on Biden's foreign-policy failures would also require the press to revisit its own shameless flattery of Biden when he was running for office. In its endorsement of Biden, the Times editorial board waxed rhapsodic over his “unusually rich grasp of and experience in foreign policy” and claimed that “he has the respect and trust of America's allies and would not be played for a fool by its adversaries.”

Instead, many in the mainstream media prefer to engage in reprehensible exercises in moral equivalency, such as the ones on display 24/7 on MSNBC since the attack on Israel and in outlets such as the Huffington Post, which recently featured a story with the headline, “Media Calls the Attack on Israel Unprovoked. Experts Say That's Historically Inaccurate.” As Israeli children were being kidnapped and slaughtered by Hamas, babies beheaded, women raped and beaten, their bodies dragged through the streets of Gaza while crowds cheered, a Teen Vogue writer, Najma Sharif, posted on X, “What did y'all think decolonization meant? vibes? papers? essays? losers.” Her post was liked by Washington Post opinions editor Karen Attiah and hundreds of thousands of others—apologists for terror, all.

The attacks on Israel have revealed to a wider public some ugly truths not just about the barbarism of Hamas, but also about its Western supporters and a cowardly media establishment that often pretends not to see what is directly in front of its face. But now we can see that face clearly: an amalgam of enthusiastic supporters of barbarism and incurious stenographers for an administration whose foreign-policy incompetence contributed to the worst day for Jews since the Holocaust.
Psalms Have They, But They Know Not

MEIR Y. SOLOVEICHIK

The Bible and its teachings helped form the basis for the Founding Fathers’ abiding belief in the inalienable rights of the individual, rights which they found implicit in the Bible’s teachings of the inherent worth and dignity of each individual.... Now, therefore, I, Ronald Reagan, President of the United States of America, in recognition of the contributions and influence of the Bible on our Republic and our people, do hereby proclaim 1983 the Year of the Bible in the United States. I encourage all citizens, each in his or her own way, to reexamine and rediscover its priceless and timeless message.

—Presidential Proclamation, February 3, 1983

A T TIMES, a tiny cultural moment can reflect a titanic sociological shift. Such is the case with a 10-second video clip from Jeopardy! On July 12, 2023, one of the “Double Jeopardy” categories was “Walking and Talking.” The clue: “This Bible book gives us the line ‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.’” All three contestants—undoubtedly all highly educated individuals, as Jeopardy! candidates tend to be—stared blankly in silence until the signature buzzer sounded. The answer, of course, was the Psalms. Thus did a show showing off individuals with wide and diverse knowledge reveal that it is possible to consider oneself educated in 21st-century America without recognizing the most famous verse of one of the most famous works of scripture, in an English rendering that marks one of the glories of literature. The moment revealed that today the Bible is no longer seen by many as “The Good Book.” Indeed, it is no longer seen by many as a book of importance at all. As recently as 1983, it was entirely conceivable for a president to mark by proclamation the Bible’s importance for America; four decades later, for at least a significant segment of society,
the Bible is no longer a cultural touchstone.

A single instant on Jeopardy! provokes us to ponder what has been lost. The tragic irony is that the entire story of Western culture is, in a sense, indebted to the Psalms; even if one does not believe in the theology expressed in the biblical book, one cannot understand the history of literature without it. The greatest of English writing—from Shakespeare to the modern novel—provides a window into the interiority of the human psyche. But this was not learned from the works of Homer, or Ovid, or Sophocles. Only in the Bible, and especially in the Psalms, could ancient literature provide such a window on man’s ability and need to look within. It is difficult to believe that the humanist literature of the West would have been possible without David’s inspiration and example. Thomas Cahill eloquently explained the literary debt owed David:

Prior to the humanist autobiographies of the Renaissance, we can count only a few isolated instances of this use of “I” to mean the interior self. But David’s psalms are full of Is: the I of repentance, the I of anger and vengeance, the I of self-pity and self-doubt, the I of despair, the I of delight, and the I of ecstasy. The Psalms are a treasure trove of personal emotions and a unique early roadmap to the inner spirit—previously mute—of ancient humanity. Whereas the historian must normally guess at the emotions of his subjects from incomplete or indirect evidence, David’s Psalms reassure us that three thousand years ago people laughed and cried just as we do, bled and cursed, danced and leapt—that our whole repertoire of emotions was theirs.

But the Psalms are most essential because of their theology: In an ancient age when the state reigned supreme, when the monarch was worshipped as a god, the Psalms presented us with a king named David who assured his subjects that there was something, Someone, higher than he, to Whom he owed everything, and to Whom even the most powerful of rulers will be called to account. As Reagan noted, it is this notion that lies at the heart of American liberty; and it is only the faith in this that has sustained some of the most heroic opponents of tyranny—millennia ago as well as today.

As I watched the clip, I was reminded of Natan Sharansky’s magisterial memoir of his experience in the Soviet Gulag. There he describes his most cherished possession, a small book of Psalms gifted him by his wife. Sharansky took it upon himself to study them, knowing little about them beforehand. Their words, he tells us, “lifted me above the mundane and directed me toward the Eternal. I especially liked Psalm 23: Although I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. For thou art with me...”

He and a Christian inmate studied scripture together and chose an unusual name for their studies: “We called our sessions ‘Reaganite readings;’ first, because President Reagan had declared either this year or the preceding one (it wasn’t exactly clear from the Soviet press) the Year of the Bible, and second, because we realized that even the slightest improvement in our situation could be related only to a firm position on human rights by the West, especially by America, and we mentally urged Reagan to demonstrate such resolve.” In the process, David’s interiority and faith sustained him:

King David now appeared before me not as a fabled hero or a mystical superman but as a live, indomitable soul—tormented by doubts, rising against evil, and suffering from the thought of his own sins. He was proud, daring, and resolute, but in order to be bold in combat with his enemies, he had to be humble before the Lord. The fear of God guided David when he entered the valley of death.

Thus the title chosen by Sharansky for his memoir: Fear No Evil. Several have reported meeting Sharansky in Jerusalem and having him readily produce the Psalms book from his pocket. When surprise is expressed that he still carries it, he immediately replies, “It carries me.”

One wonders, therefore, what Sharansky would say if he saw this clip and realized that an America that once inspired him had reached a point where the scriptural source of his inspiration could be so utterly unknown to so many of its citizens. His own story reminds us, however, that the Psalms can inspire hope even when things look bleak—hope that society may find inspiration from David once more, hope that one day an American leader would find the eloquence to declare a “Year of the Bible” once again.

If such a leader does arise, he or she can draw on the fact that there are still many millions of Americans who find daily inspiration in the Bible. Students such as my own at Yeshiva University study the sacred scriptures as well as the great Western texts, and a silver lining of societal scriptural ignorance may be that the men and women I teach have an intellectual advantage as contestants on game shows. But still, as I watched that clip, I felt nothing but foreboding; for I realized what that moment on that game show meant, warning us that civilization itself is in jeopardy. »
The Question of Elon Musk

JAMES B. MEIGS

IN JONATHAN SWIFT’S Gulliver’s Travels, young Lemuel Gulliver survives a shipwreck and washes up on the island of Lilliput. Despite standing a mere six inches high, the Lilliputians are a vain and self-important race. They are also clever, as Gulliver realizes when he awakens from a long slumber on the grass to find himself securely pinned down with “slender ligatures across my body, from my armpits to my thighs.” The Lilliputians call Gulliver the “Man-Mountain” and eventually offer him his freedom if he agrees to a number of strict edicts. For example, “the said Man-Mountain shall confine his walks to our principal high roads, and not offer to walk or lie down in a meadow or field of corn.” The Man-Mountain would be allowed to roam, in other words, but only under the strict regulatory gaze of the diminutive Lilliputian officials.

A year after his impulsive acquisition of Twitter, Elon Musk finds himself in a position not unlike that of Gulliver. As an entrepreneur, Musk is a Man-Mountain without equal. His start-ups Tesla and SpaceX have rewritten the rules of two global industries and made him—for a time, at least—the richest man on the planet. Some of his ventures in other fields (tunnel boring, brain interfaces) remain long shots. But his growing constellation of Starlink broadband-access satellites looks like another global game-changer, and, for better or worse, that company’s policies are already having a world-historical impact.

So what does Musk have to fear? Two things: The Lilliputians. And himself.

In Gulliver’s Travels, Lemuel treats the Lilliputians with gracious courtesy. That’s not Musk’s style. Every industry Musk works in—transportation, space, health, communications—exists within a dense web of regulatory oversight. A more cautious executive might try to slip below the regulatory radar. Musk is not wired that way. He can’t help antagonizing the very officials whose forbearance he requires to build his ventures. In both Europe and the U.S., those officials have lately begun stretching out their slender ligatures. Tesla, SpaceX, and X (the platform formerly known as Twitter) all now face a flurry of regulatory entanglements from government agencies.

For his new biography, Elon Musk, Walter Isaacson spent months shadowing the peripatetic executive. In the end, though, Musk remained a cipher to him, a man with “an aura that made him seem, at times, like an alien, as if his Mars mission were an aspiration to return home.” After a difficult childhood, Isaacson writes, Musk “developed a siege mentality that included an attraction, sometimes a craving, for storm and drama.” When I interviewed Musk, more than a decade ago, he didn’t strike me as a carefree daredevil so much as a man haunted by his pursuit of

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Isaacson describes Musk as a “man-child.” A former Tesla engineer I know called him “basically a big kid,” the kind of person who can’t resist poking a hornet’s nest just to see what happens. Musk’s childish and stubborn nature helped him launch extraordinary companies and bully his way through ever greater challenges and risks. In some ways, Musk resembles a high-altitude mountaineer; as soon as he escapes one near-death experience, he’s planning an even harder climb. But mountaineers operate in an environment where they and their rope mates are as far from society as a person can get. An executive engaged in global businesses must navigate complex social and political landscapes. Musk himself admits that he’s not cut out for delicate diplomacy. When he hosted Saturday Night Live in 2021, Musk described himself as having Asperger’s syndrome and noted that he often says things that upset people: “To anyone who’s been offended, I just want to say I reinvented electric cars, and I’m sending people to Mars in a rocket ship. Did you think I was also going to be a chill, normal dude?”

Perhaps his unique neural wiring helps Musk hyper-focus while tuning out distractions and naysayers. It might also explain his habit of ignoring conventional business guardrails. “I think he has long been a regulatory disaster waiting to happen,” Washington Post columnist Megan McArdle told me. Most executives in sensitive industries learn to tiptoe through china shops. Musk instead blusters and overpromises.

For years he implied that Tesla cars were on the verge of full self-driving capability when, in fact, they merely offered a highly evolved form of cruise control. Time and again he has invited scrutiny from the Securities and Exchange Commission for his carnival-sideshow salesmanship. “His astronomical risk tolerance—combined with a talent for going all Tasmanian devil until somehow it all works out—has made him rich,” McArdle continued. “But naming your driver-assist ‘autopilot’ is an invitation to bankruptcy-level class-action suits, and buying Twitter on a hahahaha-chill, normal dude?”

Indeed. Rather than trying to finesse his way through his current travails, Musk seems determined to find new hornet’s nests to poke. Even before he bought the platform, he was taking to Twitter to express his heterodox ideas. In May 2022, Musk tweeted, “In the past I voted Democrat, because they were (mostly) the kindness party. But they have become the party of division & hate, so I can no longer support them and will vote Republican.” A CEO shouldn’t have to worry that he’s taking his professional life in his hands if he expresses a political opinion. But that idea really applies only to liberals. For Musk, coming out of the closet was a daring, even reckless move. “Now, watch their dirty tricks campaign against me unfold,” he predicted. Hornet’s nest spotted—and poked.

Musk seems to take a special pleasure in tweaking progressive sensitivities. When Bernie Sanders tweeted, “We must demand that the extremely wealthy pay their fair share,” Musk shot back: “I keep forgetting that you’re still alive.” Last year, he managed to offend both Covid extremists and transgender advocates by tweeting, “My pronouns are Prosecute/Fauci.” Since buying Twitter—sorry, X—Musk has taken to behaving almost like a political candidate. Last month he visited the border at Eagle Pass, Texas, to draw attention to illegal immigration. In a livestream, he said the “situation is beyond insane and growing fast.”

Musk’s pokes at the left are often funny. But his occasional dalliances with sketchy far-right, QAnon-adjacent, and sometimes anti-Semitic accounts have become alarming. His comments on Ukraine, for example, show a worrisome soliciude toward the invading country rather than the one being invaded. Accusations of anti-Semitism spiked in September when Musk blamed the Anti-Defamation League for a fall-off in advertising on the X platform. The ADL had earlier charged that Musk’s policy of relaxing moderation rules was allowing a surge of “virulent antisemitism” on the site. The ADL is “trying to kill this platform by falsely accusing it & me of being anti-Semitic,” Musk tweeted. As Seth Mandel wrote in the April 2022 Commentary, today’s ADL is more devoted to its progressive allies than to defending Jews. Still, accusing any Jewish organization of pulling strings behind the scenes was not a good look for Musk. Since that brouhaha, X and the ADL have arrived at a truce, and the ADL again advertises on the platform.

It gets worse. During the Hamas assault on Israel, Musk recommended two X accounts as useful for “following the war in real-time.” One of them,
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@WarMonitors, is an openly anti-Semitic account that endlessly attacks “the Zionist regime.” Musk deleted the tweet, but the damage was done. The most charitable explanation is that he wanted users to see that X has up-to-the-minute coverage, but he failed to do even a cursory check to see whether the sites were reputable. I truly hope that’s the case. (In a chummy livestream discussion with Benjamin Netanyahu last month, Musk stressed his opposition to anti-Semitism.) But people are entitled to wonder why Musk keeps making these kinds of blunders. How much of his feed is made up of edgy extremists? At the very least, he is sloppy about the company he keeps.

Musk’s repeated flirtations with extremism—even if accidental—make him a dubious advocate for what remains a vital mission: making X a haven for free speech. Prior to Musk’s takeover, leftist activists, traditional media, and social media outlets worked in near lockstep when it came to suppressing topics they labeled “misinformation.” Remember how effectively they squelched the story of Hunter Biden’s laptop, or questions about whether Covid-19 leaked from a lab? The liberalization of X’s speech restrictions brought a fresh blast of ideological diversity to online discourse (and, yes, too much ugly stuff as well). Then Musk opened the “Twitter Files” to Bari Weiss, Matt Taibbi, and other independent journalists. The documents revealed that the White House, the FBI, and other government agencies routinely strong-armed Twitter executives to suppress certain topics. Clearly, with Musk in charge, the government’s back-channel influence over the platform was finished.

Almost overnight, a host of federal agencies began taking a harder line on X and Musk’s other companies. According to a report from the House Judiciary Committee, in the months after Musk took over, the Federal Trade Commission began “attempting to harass Twitter and pry into the company’s decisions on matters outside of the FTC’s mandate.” The FTC demanded information about issues, including journalists working “to expose abuses by Big Tech and the federal government”; all of the company’s internal communications “related to Elon Musk”; and the reasons why the firm terminated a former FBI official who worked at the company, along with hundreds of other demands.

The SEC began investigating Musk’s Twitter acquisition even before the deal closed. Musk provided the agency with documents and willingly testified, but then refused to appear at a follow-up deposition. “Enough is enough,” his attorney said. Now the SEC has filed suit against the mogul.

Meanwhile, SpaceX is eager to launch a second test flight of its revolutionary Starship from its space port at Boca Chica, Texas. But first it needs green lights from the FAA and, believe it or not, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and both are taking their sweet time issuing approvals. SpaceX is also being sued by the Department of Justice for “discriminating against asylees and refugees in hiring,” the department announced. SpaceX responds that, under national-security laws, it is not allowed to give non-U.S. citizens access to sensitive space technology. “This is yet another case of weaponization of the DOJ for political purposes,” Musk said in a tweet. Nor does Tesla get a pass, despite its key role in enticing Americans to buy electric cars, a top Biden priority. The Justice Department and the SEC are investigating whether the company provided excessive benefits to CEO Musk. And the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is suing Tesla over alleged racial abuses at its Fremont, California, manufacturing plant.

The Lilliputians of our federal bureaucracies have been busy, in other words. Can they keep the Man-Mountain tied down? Musk has wriggled out of tight spots before. But this time, some of his biggest challenges are self-imposed. His repeated proximity to extremist views (even if accidental) undermines his high-minded claims about free speech. At the same time, his rash decision to buy Twitter has put him in a financial bind, which gives his regulatory antagonists more power over him. And while Musk loves being on social media (way too much), owning a social-media company doesn’t play to his strengths. He’s an engineer, not a sociological savant. Many of his decisions at X—including that ridiculous name—leave me scratching my head. Still, the work Musk does remains important. SpaceX might prove to be one of the most transformative companies in American history. And freeing our social-media platforms from censorship is vital. It would be a shame if Musk’s own character flaws brought it all crashing down.

I wish we lived in a country where top executives could express conservative ideas with the same freedom as liberals. I wish we lived in a country where bureaucrats carried out their duties with scrupulous disregard for politics. But we don’t live in that country. Our federal agencies have been weaponized against conservatives at least since Obama’s IRS tried to kneecap the Tea Party. That isn’t fair, but ignoring that fact isn’t smart. That’s why I wince every time Musk pokes another hornet’s nest. I hate it when he seems more interested in making enemies than in building cars and rockets. I hate it even more when he casually amplifies random extremists on X. Musk’s mercurial, intense personality has helped him build a high-tech empire. Maybe his next project should include working on himself. »
The War After the War Between Wars

BY JONATHAN SCHANZER

The latest phase of the war between Israel and the Islamic Republic of Iran was bloody and brutal. It began on October 7 with a surprise attack by the Iran-backed Hamas terrorist group out of the Gaza Strip. Hamas fighters punched through the security barrier that has kept southern Israel relatively secure since the second intifada (2000–2005). Fighters then streamed across the border by foot, motorcycle, and ISIS-style white pickup trucks. What followed was an orgy of violence resulting in more than 1,200 dead and an estimated 2,000 injured. More than 100 Israelis—among them women and children, as well as more than a dozen Americans—were dragged back to Gaza as hostages. It would take the Israelis more than 48 hours to regain control of the Gaza envelope. Only then could the Israel Defense Forces begin to consider its next moves.

Israelis were in shock. So were many others watching from around the world. The most advanced military in the Middle East had been overrun by a terrorist organization that until 2023 was viewed by the Israeli defense establishment disdainfully as a “tactical threat.”

Unlike Iran (an existential threat) or Hezbollah (a strategic threat), Hamas had heretofore been able to carry out only unguided rocket attacks that would only occasionally penetrate Israel’s vaunted Iron Dome missile-defense system. But the group did learn to dig commando tunnels and even succeeded in pulling Corporal Gilad Shalit into one of them in 2006, holding him for five years in Gaza before a prisoner swap. Perhaps the most impressive feat ever pulled off by the group was the 2014 raid by Iran-trained frogmen, who stormed Zikim Beach, adjacent to the Gaza Strip, and raided a military garrison.

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Admittedly, Hamas has inflicted pain on Israel over the years. Multiple rocket wars have been a constant irritant to Israel. Citizens from the southern communities have sprinted to their shelters more times than they can count. Rockets have terrorized towns and cities much farther afield. Even the interception of those crude projectiles has come at a cost. Iron Dome interceptors fired to neutralize the thousands of Hamas rockets shot at Israel over the years cost more than $50,000 a pop. The financial burden of defending Israelis from a low-level threat has steadily grown.

With the October invasion, however, Hamas announced itself as a strategic threat. In the execution of a complex operation with multiple lines of attack, the group was able to inflict measurable damage. Israel thus learned a difficult lesson: Wait too long to address a challenge, and that challenge will evolve. The al-Qaeda threat of the 1990s was a case in point. The 1998 twin embassy bombings in Africa and the bombing of the USS Cole off the coast of Yemen were signs of the hospitality of the regime.

The hand of Tehran was even more obvious in the October 7 assault. The Islamic Republic has been providing weapons, training, and cash to Hamas since the early days of the terrorist group’s inception in 1988. Iranian assistance has been steady, with the exception of a rift that emerged after Syrian strongman Bashar al-Assad began slaughtering Palestinians during his country’s civil war in 2011 and 2012. Assad is another important client of the Islamic Republic who plays a crucial role in the pipeline of weapons and cash to Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Hamas leaders stood their ground for a few years but ultimately elected to set aside their differences to focus on their shared dream of destroying the world’s only Jewish state.

During the 2021 war between Hamas and Israel, reports of a Lebanon-based “nerve center” began to surface, revealing a high level of coordination between the Islamic Republic, Hamas, Hezbollah, and other groups aligned with Iran. In the two years that followed, multiple reports suggested that the nerve center remained active and that it was directing a wide range of attacks against Israel, primarily in the West Bank. The weapons pipeline arming West Bank militants was identified by the IDF as an Iranian-led operation, as was the establishment of new terror squads, such as the short-lived Lions’ Den.

Within days of the 10/7 assault, journalists from the Wall Street Journal were able to establish that Iran had, over the course of several weeks, helped Hamas plan and execute its most devastating attack. The report was hardly surprising, given the long history of cooperation between Tehran and Hamas. Nevertheless, the Biden administration responded with howls of disapproval. Never mind that the supreme leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, posted videos of the Hamas assault on the X social-media platform, conveying an almost giddy satisfaction derived from the bloodshed. And never mind that Hamas and Hezbollah figures alike acknowledged working together on the attack. The White House insisted that there was no proof of collaboration.

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The White House protests were a feeble attempt to deny a connection to the hostage diplomacy deal (announced on September 11) in which Washington agreed to release to Iran $6 billion (plus another $10 billion that the media often overlook) in frozen oil funds in exchange for the freeing of five Americans held captive by the regime. The deal was, at a minimum, the normalization of hostage-taking. One might even say that it was a signal to Tehran and its proxies that hostage-taking was permissible. Fast-forward a few short weeks, and an Iranian proxy suddenly held more than 100 Israelis—the majority of whom were civilians—against their will.

The administration further insisted that not one dollar of the billions was disbursed to the regime in Tehran, so there was no way that those funds had directly financed the slaughter. But even here, the administration was aware that the optics were quite miserable. Those funds were being held by banks in Qatar, which has been Hamas's financial sponsor for years. In fact, the tiny Gulf Arab country of fewer than 300,000 citizens has served as an external headquarters for more than a dozen Hamas leaders and functionaries, not to mention a collection of other dangerous Islamist figures from the Taliban, al-Qaeda, ISIS, the Muslim Brotherhood, and more.

The Israelis could have made more of this in the immediate aftermath of the Hamas incursion. But there was no time for finger-pointing. The IDF was still working to clear the border of terrorists. In fact, a full day after the assault, hostage crises were still unresolved in multiple communities across Israel, with reports of commando tunnel assaults in communities near the border. It was utter chaos.

Moreover, the Israelis were relieved to see unequivocal support coming out of Washington. President Joe Biden, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, and a large number of congressional leaders voiced their full-throated condemnations of Hamas while Israel tangled with fighters from the terrorist group in close-quarter combat. The support was a refreshing change from conflicts past, when Israel has been too often condemned for using “disproportionate force” in defending itself. Washington also pledged to replenish Israel's depleted weapons supplies. Naval assets even sailed to the Mediterranean as a show of force to potentially deter Iran or any of its other proxies from widening the fight.

But the presence of American sailors off the coast of Israel, while appreciated, is a sensitive issue for Jerusalem. The country has long pledged to “defend itself by itself.” Indeed, successive Israeli leaders have insisted that Israel never wants to see American boots on Israeli soil in times of conflict. That fierce sense of independence, informed by the harsh lessons of Jewish history, has driven Israel to not merely adequately defend itself against a wide range of aggressors over its 75-year history. The Israelis have prided themselves on their unparalleled intelligence capabili-

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Moreover, the Israelis were relieved to see unequivocal support coming out of Washington. President Joe Biden, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, and a large number of congressional leaders voiced their full-throated condemnations of Hamas while Israel tangled with fighters from the terrorist group in close-quarter combat. The support was a refreshing change from conflicts past, when Israel has been too often condemned for using “disproportionate force” in defending itself. Washington also pledged to replenish Israel's depleted weapons supplies. Naval assets even sailed to the Mediterranean as a show of force to potentially deter Iran or any of its other proxies from widening the fight.

But the presence of American sailors off the coast of Israel, while appreciated, is a sensitive issue for Jerusalem. The country has long pledged to “defend itself by itself.” Indeed, successive Israeli leaders have insisted that Israel never wants to see American boots on Israeli soil in times of conflict. That fierce sense of independence, informed by the harsh lessons of Jewish history, has driven Israel to not merely adequately defend itself against a wide range of aggressors over its 75-year history. The Israelis have prided themselves on their unparalleled intelligence capabili-
It was all wrong. As with the “conceptzia”—the idea in 1973 shared by Israeli leaders and intelligence professionals that the surrounding Arab states were deterred and would never attack Israel—the government of Benjamin Netanyahu and the Israeli security apparatus fell prey to groupthink, with horrific consequences. They deployed more assets to the West Bank and fewer on the Gaza border. Eerily, the 10/7 assault took place just after the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War—a war Israel almost lost—which conveyed the sense that history might be repeating itself, or worse.

If there is any good news here, it is that the Israeli public appears to have come together in a crisis. After months of bitter domestic battles over the role of the judiciary, a unity government has been formed and the population has set aside its differences. The “people’s army” called upon 300,000 reservists, including those who had previously refused to serve after proclaiming their opposition to the policies pursued by the Netanyahu government. Israelis of all stripes expressed an eagerness to settle the score and to possibly even recover their countrymen in Gaza.

Whether or not this social cohesion can hold may depend, in part, on the wider war that beckons. Israel has always found unity in the perception of a common threat. That threat is coming into sharper focus. The Islamic Republic is drawing closer to a nuclear bomb. America, certainly this administration, cannot be relied on to take action to thwart the regime’s plans. Israel will very likely, once again, need to “defend itself by itself.”

Until now, the Israelis have waged a shadow war against the Islamic Republic. The “campaign between wars,” as it is known in the IDF, has spilled over into Syria, maritime, cyber, and Iran itself, where Israel has launched direct assaults on the regime’s military and nuclear assets. An interesting debate has erupted in recent years as to whether the gray-zone war will do enough to foil Israel’s most determined enemy.

This debate will take on increased importance now that the Islamic Republic has stepped up its support to the proxy groups it has placed all around Israel’s borders. A multifront war has always been one of Tehran’s most lethal options, unleashing thousands of rockets at Israel, overwhelming its advanced but limited air defenses. The 10/7 slaughter may have been just a small taste of what the regime has in store.

—October 12, 2023

Commentary
The Story of an Israeli at War

BY JOHN PODHORETZ

Alon was born in Israel in 1985. He grew up in Jerusalem with his older brother and a baby brother and sister. They lived in a small fourth-floor walk-up in a nondescript building on the road to Bethlehem just a few miles to the east, where his parents went to shop for vegetables and fruit every week until the first intifada broke out in 1987 and the everyday atmosphere between Jews and Arabs became too fraught. Alon’s father was a prosecutor, which, in that country’s system, meant he was a member of the Jerusalem police department. His mother was an American who came to Israel as a college student and was beginning to make her way as a journalist.

In 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded and occupied Kuwait. Six months later, in January 1991, a coalition led by the United States went to war against Iraq to kick Hussein out of Kuwait. Hussein responded, in part, by firing rockets called SCUDs at Israel. Since he had had a chemical-weapons program, and since the Israelis had no way of knowing whether he might have the capability of loading chemical weapons onto the SCUDs, everyone in Israel was issued a gas mask. Everyone. Alon and his older brother had kid-sized masks. Their parents had grown-up-sized masks. Babies, like Alon’s brother and sister, could not wear them, obviously, so they were issued mamatim—clear plastic tents the size of a tiny playpen into which they could be placed and zipped up with an air filter.

The Israeli government told everyone they should not and could not go outside their homes without their masks. For Alon’s parents, any journey from their fourth-floor walk-up with their year-old twins, not yet walking, meant they had to carry the babies down, mamatim slung over their shoulders along with their own gas masks, while their older children toted their masks in train.

The SCUD attacks came at night, two, three in
the morning. The family would hustle into the room in their apartment designated as the safest; it had a heavy blast door, and the window frames and doorjamb were sealed as best as possible with wet towels to keep out the gas. Everyone would put on his or her mask. The babies, often crying in terror, were put in the mamatim—though at one point Alon’s sister spied her uncle, whose face was entirely obscured by the mask, and started playing peekaboo with him to pass the time. “Cu-coo,” she said.

One afternoon, trapped in their apartment, Alon was drawing at the kitchen table and, all but unconsciously, he started to make a whistling noise. His mother froze in place. The noise was a perfect rendering of the unholy sound of the siren that indicated a SCUD was in the air on its way to Israel.

Forty-two SCUDs were fired in 18 separate attacks over 39 days. They were inaccurate and, as it turned out, had no chemical payload. But 13 Israelis were killed and over 4,000 buildings damaged. Alon was five years old.

Alon’s high-school years took place during the second intifada, launched by Yasser Arafat’s Palestinian Authority after they refused the offer of a Palestinian state alongside Israel. In the Jerusalem neighborhood of Baka, where he walked to and from school and hung out with his friends, there were multiple suicide bombings. By the end of the second intifada, nearly 1,100 Israelis had been murdered and thousands injured. Alon finished high school in 2003 and went into the IDF. Skilled with his hands and possessed of a cool intelligence and even cooler demeanor, he was placed in a prestige brigade called the Givati. And at age 19, he found himself deployed to the Gaza Strip, the territory on the Mediterranean south of Tel Aviv that had been occupied by Egypt until Israel’s stunning victory over its then—most dangerous enemy in the Six-Day War.

Israel had not wanted to occupy Gaza; Israel’s defense minister, Moshe Dayan, had actually ordered advancing Israeli forces to avoid the Strip so as to avoid securing its territory. But the goal of the war was to defeat Egypt, and Egypt was both retreating through and making a stand in Gaza. Dayan was overruled by his superior, Yitzhak Rabin, the battle was engaged, and Gaza taken.*

The occupation of Gaza was a burl, not a territorial benefit. In the decades following the 1967 war, hundreds of thousands of Israelis moved themselves to the West Bank, to the ancient provinces of Judea and Samaria, the historical home of the Jewish people, where they formed the “settlements” that have caused such controversy. But Jews do not hear the same mystic chords of memory from Gaza, and so efforts to settle them in Gaza to create geopolitical “facts on the ground” never really took root. By the early 2000s, 8,500 Israelis had moved to 21 tiny settlements, in a situation so dangerous that those 8,500 Jewish Gazans had to be guarded by 24,000 Israeli soldiers.

Alon was one of those soldiers, his duty to protect his fellow Jews from a potential pogrom. But clearly, the balance of forces was awry. Three times as many soldiers were present in Jewish Gaza as there were civilians living their daily lives. And so, in 2005, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon made the daring and unorthodox decision to withdraw all Israeli forces—and all Jews—from the Gaza Strip and make it entirely the province of the Palestinian Authority. To do this, the Jews living in the settlements had to relocate back to Israeli territory. Most did, voluntarily if bitterly. But about 1,100 refused to abandon the homes they had made. Israeli soldiers were compelled to remove them physically. Some literally had to pull resistant co-religionists through windows to get them out. The settlers wept. The soldiers wept.

Alon, who did not support the policy of disengagement but was a loyal soldier, was one of those weeping soldiers.

A year later, in 2006, Hezbollah kidnapped three

* Please note this when you hear Rabin celebrated by Israeli leftists who want to claim him as a martyr for peace; he may have been the most hawkish leader Israel has ever had and, moreover, the most brutal toward the Palestinians.
soldiers in the north of Israel and brought them to Lebanon. That was the beginning of a missile war that lasted 32 days. Alon was deployed there. Israelis were shocked to learn that the storehouse of supplies the IDF had laid in for just this contingency had been wildly depleted, in part from looting. Alon’s mother, like tens of thousands of Israeli parents, literally drove north with sweaters and socks and boots so that their military progeny did not freeze in the mountains at night.

Alon completed his military service, though he continued in miluim—as a reservist in the IDF, he had to report on occasion to maintain his readiness. He went to college. He began to try and figure out how to make a life for himself. He married in 2013, at the age of 28. And then, in 2014, rockets began to rain down on Israel from Gaza.

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He spent a month in a tank. To this day he will not discuss what he did there, not because of shame or trauma, but for operational security.

Now it is 2023. Alon has two kids, though he is now divorced. He lives in the middle of Israel and is making a go of it in high tech, doing something that, for the life of me, I cannot understand, even though he has explained it to me, and his mother has tried to explain it to me. He has a “deck.” That I know.

Consider Alon’s life—oh, and I forgot one detail. When he was a baby, his older brother reported to his mother that there was something “sparking” on the oil tank under the stairs of their apartment building. She called the cops. Presumably a worker traveling into Jerusalem from the West Bank had gotten off a bus, taken a device out of a backpack, and stashed it on top of the gas tank. It was a bomb. It was also a dud. But that was just dumb luck.

So, now, again, consider Alon’s life. In Jerusalem, where he spent the first 18 years of his life, he endured rocket fire from Iraq as a five-year-old—Iraq, which was engaged in war not with Israel but with a U.S.-led coalition of 42 countries, not one of them called “Israel.” At 15, men were strapping bombs to themselves and blowing themselves up near his home, seeking to take as many Jews with them as possible—after Israel offered their leaders a state of their own. Twice.

At 19, Alon was deployed to Gaza, where he guarded Jews from being torn apart for the crime of living in a place his country hadn’t even wanted to occupy. At 20, he cried as he forcibly removed some of those Jews from those homes. At 28, Gaza attacked Israel and he was forced to spend a month in combat in a tank. And now, here we are, in 2023. He has been called up yet again. I don’t know what this will mean. I suspect, given his experience, he will go into Gaza again. That will mean this 38-year-old man will have been a soldier, in Gaza, over each of the past three decades.

Not one hair on the head of a Gazan civilian did Alon disturb. Not one Palestinian suicide bomber did he offend to cause the crime. Not one rocket has his nation fired first at Gaza. Not one baby in Gaza has been beheaded by an Israeli. He is an Israeli, and they want to kill him, and they keep trying to kill him, and his mother, and his father, and his siblings, and his children. And all Israelis, and all Jews.

The other week he sat with his kids and took a little film clip of them giggling while they watched Charlie Chaplin in Modern Times. His start-up does something involving network security. He would like to show you his deck. He’s very smart, so I’m sure it’s very brilliant.

His life is a blessing. His country is a blessing. The evil that wishes to obliterate him must instead be obliterated. Alon is my nephew.
What Is ‘Russophobia’?

How Russia came to embrace its preferred victim narrative

By Gary Saul Morson

IN THE PAST DECADE, the use of the term “Russophobia” has skyrocketed in Russian mass media. All but unknown in Soviet times, “Russophobia” first entered mainstream discourse with the publication of mathematician Igor Shafarevich’s short book of the same name in 1989. The moment could not have been more favorable for its reception. With the discrediting of Marxism-Leninism and the shame occasioned by the revelation of Soviet crimes, what it meant to be Russian had become a pressing issue. If not Communism, then what was “the Russian idea,” and what was Russia’s purpose in the world? Such questions might seem odd to Americans, but for the past two centuries, Russians have never ceased asking them.

Inside Russia, proponents of different national ideas could agree that, whatever it might be, criticism of Russia was not only unfounded but entirely irrational. Russia is a force for good in the world—that is the central conviction of Russian nationalism. If we move forward to 2023, we see how that is playing out in a conflict that to us is morally lopsided in one direction, but to Russians in the other. Thus, accusations of Russian war crimes in Ukraine are dismissed as Russophobic propaganda. So are charges that Russia wants to reconstitute its empire or dominate its neighbors. Calling Russia “authoritarian” is Russophobic. Blaming Russians for Stalin’s crimes is Russophobic. And mentioning Russian anti-Semitism, corruption, backwardness, or rejection of the rule of law—these are all Russophobic. Because people in the West judge Russian motives by their own, goes the thinking, they detect naked self-interest at work when Russia is at its most noble. And it has ever been thus. “They ...are incapable of understanding the self-abnegation of our Emperor, who wants nothing for himself but desires everything for the good of the

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Igor Shafarevich’s *Russophobia* argued that any criticism of Russia’s aggressive tendencies simply proved once again that the world wanted to weaken, if not destroy, Russia.

world,” Anna Pavlovna Scherer fervently proclaims at the beginning of *War and Peace*, which was published in 1865 and set (in that first scene) in 1805. Today, Anna Pavlovna would attribute the mean-spirited criticism of Russia to Russophobia. As the word “imperialism” was for the Soviets, now “Russophobia” is the get-out-of-jail-free card, the excuse that never stops excusing.

In Soviet days, the enemy was capitalism; today it is “liberalism.” Criticism of anything Russian—except criticism of Russia’s own liberals—serves the enemy and therefore can result only from irrational Russophobia. Those adept at diagnosing and detecting this disease—let us call them “Russophobists”—argue that Russia is penetrated not only by a “fifth column” of foreign agents but also by a “sixth column” of liberals who hate their homeland.

Shafarevich’s *Russophobia* solved the problem of how to secure some semblance of Russian national honor when the ideology that had justified everything Russia had done over the previous 70 years had collapsed ignominiously. The more Russia turned to an expansionist foreign policy upon Vladimir Putin’s rise to power in 2000, the more Russophobia was detected by Russian nationalists. Criticism of Russia’s aggressive tendencies was depicted not as the reaction to that policy but its cause. Any such criticism simply proved once again that the world, especially the Western world, wanted to weaken, if not destroy, Russia—and that Russia had no choice but to defend itself.

Since 2012, the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, a government think tank, has investigated this supposed Russophobia. It has launched a campaign to purge it from textbooks and organized conferences devoted to it. Its leading researcher, Oleg Nemensky, published a substantial study entitled *Russophobia as an Ideology*, which endeavors to give the concept a firm scholarly basis.

But what exactly is Russophobia? Russians trace the word to the 19th-century poet and diplomat Fyodor Tyutchev. In a letter to his sister, Tyutchev complained:

> It would be possible to give an analysis of a modern phenomenon, which is acquiring an increasingly pathological character. This is the Russophobia of some Russian people…. They used to tell us, and they really thought so, that

in Russia they hate the lack of rights, the lack of freedom of the press, and so on, and so on—and that it is precisely the presence of all these things that they like in Europe.

Tyutchev’s proof that these Russia-haters were really motivated by Russophobia was that even Alexander II’s extensive reforms ensuring rights already enjoyed in Europe—from freeing the serfs to looser laws governing speech and publication—made no difference in their attitude. Neither did most egregious Western violations of justice and morality, which should have, in Tyutchev’s view, caused a greater degree of self-examination on the part of those who would judge Russia. “In the phenomenon that I am talking about,” Tyutchev wrote, “there can be no principles as such, only instincts.”

Though the usual charge today is that foreigners are being unfair to Russia, the first substantive allegation of Russophobia was directed not against Europeans but their Russian admirers, known as “Westernizers.” At the time Tyutchev was complaining to his sister, Russian Westernizers were indeed pointing out the ways Russia was backward, corrupt, and “uncivilized” by European standards. They did seem to revel in fault-finding and portrayed themselves as engaged in a key historical task—to complete the job begun two centuries earlier by Peter the Great.

That czar made no secret of his contempt for anything Russian. He revolutionized the life of the Russian nobility by forcing wholesale Europeanizing change on everything from education and dress to manners and the status of women. The czars who followed Peter after his death in 1735 made the 18th century an era of Russian apprenticeship to European knowledge, customs, and manners. By 1800, aristocrats no longer spoke Russian to one another. Tolstoy’s Anna Pavlovna delivers her fervently patriotic speeches in French, the language that, as Tolstoy remarks, “our grandfathers not only spoke but thought.” Even Tyutchev’s letter about Russophobes was written in French! Russian had become a language suitable only for speaking with peasants. Prince Andrei, the hero of *War and Peace*, shows contempt for his interlocutors by using Russian, as he would with a peasant, intoned in a French accent—indicating that such speech is un-
If there was ever a Russophobe, it was Pyotr Chaadaev. His country, he explained, was culturally worthless. Russians “have not advanced along with other people.”

The catalyst for that reaction, and the conventional starting point for courses on modern Russian thought, was Pyotr Chaadaev’s “First Philosophical Letter” (published in 1836). If there was ever a Russophile, it was Chaadaev. His country, he explained, was culturally worthless. Russians “have not advanced along with other people...we have not been affected by the universal education of mankind.” Cut off from the West for centuries by the Mongol conquest, Russia experienced no Middle Ages, no Age of Chivalry, no Renaissance, no Age of Reason. When Peter finally dragged Russians into Western culture, they became mere copycats.

As a result, Chaadaev asserted, Russians would always remain incapable of originality: “Not one useful idea has germinated in the sterile soul of our fatherland.” If Russians had never existed, civilization would have been none the worse. In their very souls, Russians were isolated not only from European historical achievements, but also from history itself. While European consciousness is shaped by past ages, Russians “live only in the most narrow kind of present without a past and without a future.” Unlike “civilized peoples,” Russians spent their years in “immobile brutishness” and never developed “the ideas of duty, justice, law, and order.”

And that’s just the beginning. As Chaadaev describes them, Russians are people of “slothful audacity” who are “indifferent to good and evil, to truth and falsehood.” Their very physiognomies reflect their vacuousness: “Even in our glances I find that there is something strange, vague, cold, uncertain.” If Russia had not expanded from the Oder River to the Bering Sea or served as the land through which “the barbarian hordes...passed...before precipitating themselves upon the West, we would scarcely have furnished a chapter in world history.”

For two centuries, self-hating Russians have argued in this way, and Russophobists cite them with indignation. Despisers of Russia appear often enough in literature, too. In Ivan Turgenev’s 1867 novel Smoke, the witty Potugin recalls attending London’s Crystal Palace exhibition of inventions and thinking that “our mother, Orthodox Russia, might sink into the nethermost pit, the dear creature, without disturbing a single nail or pin at the exhibition.” Russians, he observes, didn’t even invent the samovar. All that foreigners buy from Russia is raw materials, he laments—a line that stings all the more today. Apart from food in East European grocery stores, what does anyone ever buy that’s made in Russia? When, in 2014, John McCain called Russia “a gas station masquerading as a country,” his comment must have struck a nerve precisely because it seemed to channel an opinion Russians were trying to suppress in themselves.

Still more offensively, Turgenev’s Potugin describes Russians as constitutionally slavish. While the government has abolished serfdom, he explains, “the habits of slavery are too deeply ingrained in us...in all things we want a master,” usually a person but sometimes a “tendency” (by which he means an ideology). “Why we should enslave ourselves is a mystery,” he continues, “but evidently that is our nature.” Russophobists vehemently object when Westerners cite centuries of authoritarianism as proof that Russians do not value individual liberty, but, once again, this is an argument they seem to be having with themselves.

And yet, Potugin concludes, matters are not hopeless: “All that’s needed is to be truly humble...and borrow from our elder brothers what they have invented before us and better than us.” It is not a recommendation to flatter national self-esteem. Such thinking, with which Turgenev agreed, deeply irritated Fyodor Dostoevsky (who was deeply irritated by Turgenev in any case). A particularly repulsive character in The Brothers Karamazov wishes that Napoleon had vanquished Russia: “A clever nation would have conquered a very stupid one and annexed it. We should have had very different institutions.” This is how today’s anti-Putin liberals sound to many Russians.

Vasily Grossman’s novel Forever Flowing (published in Russia in 1989) outdoes Potugin’s description of serfdom’s role in shaping Russian mentality. In Russian history, Grossman asserts, progress almost always came when a cruel leader, such as Peter or Lenin, imposed it on a slavish people who consequently learned to become even more slavish: “Western development was based on a growth in freedom, while Russia’s was based on the intensification of slavery.”
“Russian soul” actually reflects a “thousand years of slavery.” For a brief period, between the liberation of the serfs in 1861 and the 1917 revolution, ideas of freedom spread, and “in February 1917 the path of freedom lay straight ahead.” Instead, “Russia chose Lenin.” When will Russia be free? “Perhaps never.”

Some Russophobists attribute these judgments to Grossman’s Jewishness, but the think-tanker Oleg Nemensky cites even more insulting ones voiced by non-Jewish Russians. He quotes the journalist Valery Panyushkin’s observation that “it would be a good thing for everyone in the world if the Russian nation ceased,” and the music critic Artemy Troitsky’s comment that “Russian men [are] for the most part animals…. When I see them, from cops to deputies, I think that they, in principle, should die out. Which, fortunately, they are now doing.”

Even at the height of the Cold War, I never heard anything similar said about Russia or the Russians in the United States or indeed anywhere in the West. People who regarded the Soviet government as evil expressed sympathy with the trials of the Russian people and great admiration for the courage of the dissidents who risked everything to speak out. Nemensky does manage to find Nazis to quote, Nazis who did call for exterminating Russians, but that makes his failure to find American Russophobes offering similar views all the more striking. After all, the Nazis regarded Russians as only one of several peoples to be exterminated, so their plans hardly constitute evidence of special animus.

CHAADAEV’S FIRST philosophical letter struck a nerve. In response, early Slavophiles—those who passionately made the case for Russia’s uniqueness as a cultural and moral force in the world—responded by identifying special virtues in the Russian character. Moderate Westernizers, including Turgenev, argued that Russians needed to set aside their love of sheepskin coats, bast shoes, and the fermented bread drink called kvass and learn from Frenchmen. The much more numerous radical Westernizers sought to fuse their attraction for Western ideologies with their Russian patriotism. They discovered in Russia’s very “belatedness” the promise that, because it was culturally and politically “young,” Russia would someday supplant doddering “old” Europe.

The Bolsheviks transformed the messianic Russian Orthodox faith into the promise that Russia would initiate a worldwide Communist paradise. If some early Bolsheviks proposed destroying all monuments of Russia’s cultural past, Stalin eventually revived old-fashioned chauvinism and xenophobia. That was when the world learned that Russians had invented just about everything. Its enemies were identified as “rootless cosmopolitans,” the most rootless of whom were, of course, Jews. As many have noticed, when all else fails, one can usually unite Russians against Jewish influence, which is what Shafarevich tried to do in Russophobia.

Shafarevich quotes several Russian writers, mostly Jews, expressing what he deems irrational hatred for everything Russian. In his summary, they accuse Russians of “a servile mentality, the lack of a sense of self-worth, intolerance toward foreign views, and a lackeyish mixture of feelings of malice, envy, and admiration toward foreign power.” Russians allegedly cannot imagine themselves without an empire and display a tendency to messianism, despotism, and even anti-Semitism!

Today’s Russophobes favor Western-style democracy, Shafarevich continues, whereas “by all indications, the Western multiparty system …is on its way out.” They share “annoyance at the thought that Russia might seek some sort of path of its own in history,” and they do everything possible “to prevent the people from taking a path that it works out and chooses for itself (of course, not with the help of the secret ballot, but through historical experience).” Shafarevich does not explain how, without a secret ballot, one could know a given path was chosen rather than imposed.

Russophobes, Shafarevich adds, dream of turning Russia into “a robot” following “a program that has been developed on the other side of the earth…. And democracy plays the role of such a ‘program’ … that has no organic connection whatsoever with the country.” He develops Augustin Cochin’s theory of how elite groups—a “small people” within a “greater people”—can destroy all traditional values, as happened during the French Revolution. In the Russian case, Shafarevich explains, the “little people” really are a people: the Jews.
What, according to the Russophobists, are the main accusations against Russia? Curiously, several repeat the very characterizations Russians praise!

Although liberal dissidents of course include many non-Jews, Shafarevich allows, Jewish predominance explains why liberals place such emphasis on “the cult of emigration.” “If we ...ask, just whose national feelings are manifesting themselves here ... there can be no doubt as to the answer.... The 'Jewish question' has assumed incomprehensible power over minds.... And apparently the existence of a ‘Russian question’ is not recognized at all.”

The goal of Russophobes, whether Jewish or Russian, is “the final destruction of the religious and national foundations” of the Russian people. Shafarevich shares the common Russian assumption that individual lives can be meaningful only if lived for an ideal, which he identifies with nationality: “Individual people need peoples. Belonging to his people makes a person a participant in History and privy to the mysteries of the past and future. He can feel ...the significance and lofty meaning of humanity’s earthly existence and his own role in it.”

The Jews instead extol “universal” (actually Western) values the better to isolate Russians from their historical memory and so reduce them to easily manipulated human material—“a new and final disaster, after which there will probably be nothing left of our people.” Shafarevich fears that Russians will become as vacuous as Chaadaev maintained they already were.

Yakov Petrovich Golyadkin, the schizophrenic hero of Dostoevsky’s novel The Double, begets another Yakov Petrovich Golyadkin, who causes him excruciating psychic pain by voicing exactly what the real Golyadkin most fears to hear. In much the same way, when Russians accuse Westerners of Russophobia, they often quote them saying just what has caused the most shame when voiced at home.

IT IS EASY ENOUGH to find Western quotations denouncing Russia, just as one can readily discover hostile characterizations of many nations. Whenever one people clashes with another, they say terrible things. As the Kingston trio used to sing:

The whole world is festering with unhappy souls. The French hate the Germans. The Germans hate the Poles.

...and I don’t like anybody very much!

Yet one does not speak of Francophobia or Flemophobia. That is why Nemensky argues that, if Russophobia is to be more than a “completely banal phenomenon,” it must be “a phenomenon of a different order,” analogous to anti-Semitism. To prove that it is, Nemensky describes Russophobia as a whole “ideology.” Westerners sympathetic to accusations of Russophobia have followed suit.

Like anti-Semitism, Russophobists argue, irrational hatred of Russia developed over centuries. In Creating Russophobia: From the Great Religious Schism to Anti-Putin Hysteria, Swiss journalist and parliamentarian Guy Mettan traces Russophobia to the competition between Rome and Byzantium, a time long before Russia existed. It is routine to mention Western Christianity’s disdain for Orthodoxy and Western travelers’ shocking descriptions of Russia since the 16th century. Russophobists never seem to ask whether those descriptions might have some rational basis.

And what, according to Russophobists, are the main accusations against Russia? Curiously, several repeat the very characterizations that Russians praise! From the Slavophiles to today’s Eurasianists (adherents to a “semi-official” ideology led by Alexander Dugin), defenders of Russianness have insisted that Russia is not European. Russia and Europe, they maintain, uphold opposite values. Europeans favor liberalism and regard the nation as a collection of individuals, while Russians prefer central authority and give primacy to the nation. It is therefore curious to find Nemensky accusing Russophobes of mendaciously inventing a fundamental clash of “two cultures.” Namely, “the European culture of freedom and another culture—the culture of absolute national sovereignty.”

Westerners, we are told, insist that Russians are not Europeans but “uncivilized” barbarians who absorbed a Mongol mentality. But that has been the position of Eurasianism since its inception a century ago. As its founder Nikolai Trubetskoy maintained, Russians must therefore uphold “the legacy of Genghis Khan.” Eurasianism’s most influential thinker,
Russophobists agree that Poland is the most Russophobic country of all, but Poland did, after all, disappear for more than a century after Russian-led partitions.

Lev Gumilev, rejected all criticism of the Mongols as a “black legend” devised by Catholic Westerners to divide Russians from other steppe peoples. Russophobists repeat that Westerners disparage Russians as “Asiatic,” while Gumilev and Dugin exalt Russia’s Asianism. Where is the absurdity in taking Russian thinkers at their word?

Russian Russophobists react with ire, and Western ones with ridicule, at the suggestion that Russians favor simplistic Manichean and apocalyptic thinking, in which good is all on one side and evil on the other. So argues Dugin, who nevertheless repeatedly warns that, in confronting the West, “we are dealing with a system of illegitimate liberal terror; a political system created by the cannibalistic junta of international maniacs … leading humanity to suicide.” America, liberalism’s leader today, is “a country of absolute evil” and the world order it has created “is the worst order that has ever existed and should be totally destroyed.”

Russophobes slander Russians as content to live without rights and the rule of law. But as early as 1811, Russia’s first great historian, Nikolai Karamzin, advised Czar Alexander I against just those dangerous political concepts or any others limiting autocratic power. “Autocracy,” he cautioned the czar, “has founded and resuscitated Russia. Any change in her political constitution has led in the past and must lead in the future to her perdition.” If the czar ever followed the European model, the people would rise up and proclaim that he had “exceeded his authority.” His advice: “You may do everything, but you may not limit your authority by law!” Why is Nemensky incensed that Russophobes describe Russians as slavish enough to refuse legal rights even if thrust upon them?

Nemensky, Shafarevich, and other Russophobists are well aware of Stalin’s crimes, including the mass deportation of several ethnic groups. They also know about the deliberate starvation of several million Ukrainian peasants. But they do not allow that Lithuanians, Chechens, Poles, and Ukrainians might have some rational basis to fear Russians. No, such fear is what Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky called “Russophobic paranoia” because Russians were themselves the victims of Marxism, a Western ideology that, it is sometimes added, was imposed mostly by Jews. As for Stalin, he was not a Russian but a Georgian. By that logic, we should give the Germans a pass since Hitler, after all, was an Austrian.

As the liberal jurist Bogdan Kistyakovsky observed in 1909, if there is one thing on which Russian conservatives and radicals agree, it is contempt for limited power and the rule of law. Conservatives detect the legalistic Catholic spirit, while radicals discern a mystification serving illegitimate power. Kistyakovsky quoted radical populist Nikolai Mikhailovsky’s famous comment that “freedom is a great and tempting thing, but we do not want freedom if, as in Europe, it only increases our debt to the people [peasants].” Lenin’s contempt for legalism was unbounded. In his article “A Contribution to the History of the Question of the Dictatorship [of the Proletariat],” he insisted, “The scientific term ‘dictatorship’ means nothing more nor less than authority untrammeled by any laws, absolutely unrestricted by any rules whatever, and based directly on force.” He instructed that Russia’s new law code inscribe the Party’s use of extralegal force as permanent. Terror “should be substantiated and legalized in principle, without evasion or embellishment.”

Mettan, Pat Buchanan, and other Western defenders of Russia discover Russophobia in the assumption that Russia is incorrigibly imperialistic. They do not mention that Dugin forthrightly expressed the received view that “Russia is unthinkable without empire.”

How can we be so confident that if Russia absorbs Ukraine, it will gobble up Moldova next? Well, if we start with Ivan the Terrible’s conquest of Kazan in 1552, the conventional beginning of Russian expansion, and trace the boundaries of the USSR 400 years later, we find that Russia has on average added to itself territory larger than Belgium every year. Is it any wonder that bordering countries fear conquest? Russophobists agree that Poland is the most Russophobic country of all, but Poland did, after all, disappear for more than a century after Russian-led partitions. No sooner did it gain its independence after World War I than it was invaded, unsuccessfully, by Lenin’s Red Army. The Hitler-Stalin Pact partitioned it again. Though nominally independent, postwar Poland was entirely Sovietized. The Hitler-Stalin pact also gave the Baltic states to the USSR, which not only invaded and Sovietized them, but also deported enough people,
who were replaced with Russians, to alter significantly the demographic balance. When the Russian Federation claims to be solicitous about the welfare of Baltic Russians, it does not mention how they got there.

Russofobists and their Western sympathizers have a point that Russia was bound to feel threatened by NATO’s expansion. But to speak of “NATO expansion” is misleading because, after all, it was the East European states that urgently demanded membership for much the same reason that Sweden and Finland recently asked to join. What country near Russia would not want powerful allies?

Regardless, the term is abused, but does Russophobia exist? After the invasion of Ukraine, Tchaikovsky concerts, translations of Russian literature, exhibitions of Russian art, lectures on Dostoevsky—anything Russian—were canceled in Western Europe and North America. The Dutch prime minister had to caution citizens not to beat up local Russians. Proponents of “decolonizing” the American university curriculum demand we cease teaching Pushkin, Tolstoy, and other Russian classics as they are somehow tainted by what is happening today. Should we also stop studying Chinese because of the Uyghurs, along with anything Japanese, French, German, and American? Refusing to read Anna Karenina certainly sounds Russophobic. And yet, I am not sure. Perhaps we are just witnessing the extension of cancel culture to a new and convenient target?

I cannot help wondering whether indignation over Russophobia exemplifies where identity politics leads. Both thrive on victimology, and for a victim, as Dostoevsky observed, “all is permitted.” Violence becomes delayed justice.

Nemensky recognizes that Russians have internalized Russophobic arguments so profoundly that they know them “much better than the reverse ones.” As a result, he concedes, “the modern Russian self-consciousness is characterized by a strong sense of persecution.” If he understood Dostoevsky, Nemensky would recognize how attractive, if not addictive, that sense can be. “It is sometimes very pleasant to take offense,” Father Zossima observes in The Brothers Karamazov to the loathsome Fyodor Pavlovich. A person may know that he “has caught at a word and is making a mountain out of a molehill …yet he will be the first to take offense, and will revel in his resentment till he feels great pleasure in it, and so pass on to genuine vindictiveness.” Fyodor Pavlovich adds that it can also be “distinguished…to be insulted.” Victims occupy the moral high ground, and sacrificing integrity is a small price to pay for moral superiority and an unchallengeable preemptive excuse for anything. Perhaps Putin’s Russia holds a magnifying mirror to ourselves.
At long last, schools nationwide are changing how they teach kids to read. All it will take is for a generation of teachers to forget everything they believe about literacy.

By Robert Pondiscio

BAD IDEAS IN TEACHING are like monsters in horror movies: No matter how many times you kill them, they don't stay dead. That is, when you can kill them at all.

Consider “learning styles.” Cognitive scientists have searched in vain for evidence to support the common belief that one child is a visual learner, another auditory, while a third learns best through a hands-on, “kinesthetic” approach. Neither is there any reason to believe children are “right-brained” or “left-brained,” or use only 10 percent of their brain. Education is sloppy with demonstrably mistaken beliefs that warp classroom practice to children's detriment, particularly in the rock-bottom basic task of public education: teaching children to read.

I became a second-career South Bronx fifth-grade teacher in 2002 when I was nearly 40 years old and decades removed from my own elementary-school days. Many of the “best practices” I learned and was expected to use with my students bore no resemblance to my distant memories of elementary school. Nowhere was this more true than in “language arts,” itself a term of recent coinage to replace the perfectly useful “reading and writing.” I remembered very little explicit instruction in those subjects beyond the first years of elementary school. The old bromide seemed true: First

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November 2023
I learned to read, then I read to learn. By contrast, reading instruction never ended in my fifth-grade classroom, which was filled with struggling readers, all black and Hispanic children growing up in America’s poorest congressional district. My school’s “literacy block” was constantly expanding to take up an extraordinary amount of the school day. First it was 90 minutes, then two hours, then a second literacy block was added at the end of the school day. Science? Social Studies? Art and music? Those were “specials” and would just have to wait. First, we had to teach kids to read.

Only I didn’t actually “teach” reading. I coached it. I “modeled” it. Gathering students on a classroom rug, I demonstrated the habits of good readers with anodyne “teaching points” such as “good readers pay attention to what characters say and do.” Then I sent them off to practice on whatever books they chose to read, interrupting them every few minutes to “stop and jot” their “noticings” on Post-it notes, which they stuck in their books until they looked like unmade beds. I circled around the room “conferencing” with my students, asking them about the books I had not read and was not expected to know. During “Readers and Writers Workshop,” as these sessions were known, I was instructed to address the children not as “boys and girls” or even “students” but as “readers” and “authors,” as if this could be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Once a week, I was visited by a “literacy coach” under contract from Columbia University’s Teachers College whose presence in my classroom I came to dread. She spoke in childlike upspeak, making her every utterance sound like a question. A veritable jukebox of teaching homilies, she encouraged me to “be the author of your own teaching.” But when I took that advice and gave explicit explanations or directions to my students, she would shake her head and say, “That’s not teaching, that’s giving instructions.” Frustration gave way to exasperation, followed by resistance, and ultimately hostility bordering on contempt. Whatever it was that these struggling readers needed, it wasn’t this inscrutable curriculum.

Correction: There was no curriculum. No textbooks or student workbooks. No units or lesson plans. No formal assessments by which to gauge my students’ progress—nothing that would have offered a road map or even a life preserver to a new teacher. When I asked what exactly I was supposed to be teaching, she replied, “Mr. Pondiscio, you’re the best person to know what your children need.” How could that be true or even remotely plausible? Eventually, she let me in on the secret to the ad hoc and improvisational approach that I was inflicting on my students, only 1 in 5 of whom could read on grade-level; most were far below. “This isn’t a curriculum,” she informed me. “It’s a philosophy.”

The architect of this “philosophy” was a Columbia professor named Lucy Calkins, one of the nation’s foremost reading gurus and a promoter of “balanced literacy.” That was the approach to reading instruction that emerged in the 1990s as an attempt to reconcile the long-running debate between phonics and whole-language reading instruction. The method leans heavily on instructional techniques for which the research evidence is thin. They include “cueing,” which asks struggling readers to guess at unfamiliar words based on “context clues”—looking at illustrations or the first letter of the word and asking what word might make sense. The balanced-literacy classroom emphasizes heavy doses of independent reading of books that students choose for themselves, and on “ leveled reading.” Like Goldilocks’s porridge, some books are “just right” for struggling readers: not too hard, not too easy. The belief—and it is just a belief, as there is no proof that it improves comprehension—is that by reading large volumes of words at their “ instructional level” (one step higher is “ frustration level”), children will rise steadily to proficiency.

Calkins’s greatest sin against literacy is what can only be described as the Tinkerbell Effect: the sense that children will become good readers if their teachers would only believe with sufficient fervor. The overwhelming sense one gets after marinating in her methods is that the secret to literacy is simply getting kids to love books and stories—not so much teaching reading as selling it to children. It is no surprise that this philosophy would resonate with a generation raised on sentimental movies such as Dead Poets Society and Freedom Writers, which painted effective teaching as a rejection of the tired orthodoxy of facts, rules, memorization, and drill-and-kill. Great teaching means connecting with students on a personal level! It’s allyship and unlocking their hidden talents! Calkins’s methods according to Calkins’s method, the secret to literacy is simply getting kids to love books and stories—not so much teaching reading as selling it to children.
are seductive, compelling, child-friendly, and almost wholly unsupported by reading research.

In September, Columbia University announced it was cutting ties with Calkins and “dissolving” her multimillion-dollar Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, a stunning denouement that came just weeks after another shocker: New York City announced its schools would switch to one of three new phonics-heavy reading programs. Calkins’s “Units of Study,” which had dominated reading instruction for more than two decades, would no longer be required. In fact, it would no longer be tolerated. New York City was trying to kill the horror-movie monster.

The New York City school system is a behemoth. By far the nation’s largest, it enrolls more than 1 million students in over 1,800 schools scattered among 32 different community school districts. A single district on Staten Island, the least populous borough, serves more students than the entire Seattle public-school system. The city’s districts and “zones” have historically operated with a certain degree of independence. If getting a large, unwieldy bureaucracy to adopt a new way of doing things is comparable to an aircraft carrier changing directions, New York City’s school system is the Seventh Fleet, only without the military’s tradition of saluting and following orders.

Nevertheless, the city’s Department of Education has commanded more than 1,000 elementary schools to adopt and use one of three commercially published reading programs selected by the central office. They are called Wit and Wisdom, EL Education, and Into Reading. Each has been adjudged by EdReports, which independently evaluates curriculum materials, to “meet expectations” for alignment to standards and teacher usability, including texts for students that are “high quality and engaging, as well as appropriately rigorous and organized to support knowledge building.”

Half of the city’s school districts have made the transition to one of the three new reading programs this year; the rest will follow suit for the 2024–25 school year. Dubbed NYC Reads, the $35 million initiative also includes money for instructional coaches and “professional development,” or training for teachers on the new programs, which sounds unremarkable except that surprisingly little teacher-training time is curriculum-specific. The citywide mandate fulfills the promise made by New York City Mayor Eric Adams and his schools chancellor, David Banks, when they took office two years ago to “give children the basic foundational skills of reading, teach them to sound out words, teach them to decode complex letter combinations, and build them into confident readers.” Gotham has entered the reading wars on the side of phonics.

Massive bureaucracies are hard to love or praise, but we must credit New York City’s Department of Education for commendable bravery against long odds. By all appearances, the city’s educrats are earnestly trying to get reading instruction right. But actually doing so would be a feat without precedent in American education: No major metropolitan school district has ever managed to raise reading achievement at scale, or to make higher test scores stick.

In fact, an education miracle is a reliable prelude to a scandal. A company hired to grade tests in Philadelphia 10 years ago noticed a pattern of erasures from wrong to right answers deemed “statistically improbable” across dozens of schools. Three principals were fired. Celebrated success stories in multiple schools in Washington, D.C., were found to be the product of rigged graduation rates, inflated grades, and faked attendance numbers. In 2009, Atlanta schools chief Beverly Hall was named National Superintendent of the Year, the Nobel Prize of school administration. A few years later, she was under indictment for racketeering in a cheating scandal in which nearly 200 teachers were implicated. She faced 45 years in prison but died before her case came to trial.

Every impulse in public-education policy and practice weighs against what New York is trying to accomplish. Almost nowhere are schools the top-down monoliths people assume, where states and districts adopt a curriculum and teachers fall into line, delivering it robotically. Education tolerates and even encourages teachers’ view of themselves as free agents who “meet the children where they are” and customize their lessons accordingly—or who also listen to the latest diktats from the district and then return to their classrooms, close the door, and do what feels right. That is likely to be the case with these new rules. Old habits die hard. Generations of teachers have been trained and remain stubbornly attached to ideas about how to teach reading that are unsupported by research and basic science. And while there’s always an

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**Generations of teachers have been trained and remain stubbornly attached to ideas about how to teach reading that are unsupported by basic science.**

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*Getting Reading Right: November 2023*
In the last several years, much of the U.S. has been swept by a ‘science-of-reading’ movement, which is itself the latest outbreak of long-running ‘reading wars.’

The history of reading instruction in American schools can be traced back to the early 20th century, with the publication of Rudolf Flesch’s 1955 bestseller *Why Johnny Can’t Read*. This book, along with *A Nation at Risk*, a 1983 report by the U.S. Department of Education, has been credited with inspiring a nationwide push for educational reform.

In the last several years, the trend has been amplified by a wave of legislative initiatives aimed at mandating curriculum and instruction in the “science of reading.” These laws, passed in 45 states over the past three years, have led to a groundswell of professional development and curricular changes that have been sweeping across America’s public schools. It determined that certain instructional methods, notably phonics, are better and more effective than others. “Kids need decoding. Kids need reading comprehension strategies. Kids need fluency. And putting time into those things is really critical,” says Tim Shanahan, professor emeritus of urban education at the University of Illinois at Chicago, who served on the panel and contributed to its report. The reading wars were over. Phonics won. A brief era of peace between Republicans and Democrats on education policy led to bipartisan support for the No Child Left Behind Act and George W. Bush’s $1 billion Reading First initiative. “And then the Iraq War happened,” Shanahan said.

If American education is having yet another Great Awakening on reading instruction, much of the credit is due to Emily Hanford, a reporter and podcaster with American Public Media. She produced a series of radio documentaries on reading instruction starting in 2018 with “Hard Words: Why aren’t kids being taught to read?” which emphasized that many teachers are not equipped with necessary knowledge of phonics and linguistics. Her most recent podcast, *Sold a Story*, which was nominated for a Peabody Award, took on the most influential figures in the field—aside from Calkins, she looked at Marie Clay, who developed a widely used intervention program called Reading Recovery, and the “leveled reading” promoters Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell.

In contrast to decades of education-reform efforts, which blithely assumed that teachers knew how to teach reading and needed only to be held accountable, Hanford painted a compelling picture of teachers having been betrayed by demonstrably false ideas about reading instruction sold to them as best practices by colleges of education, commercial publishers, and gurus like Calkins. Casting teachers not as sinners but as sinned-against granted teachers permission to rise from their defensive crouch and demand better training and curriculum. It also drove a groundswell of legislative initiatives aimed at mandating curriculum and instruction in the “science of reading.”

A study published earlier this year by the Albert Shanker Institute, an education think tank run out of the American Federation of Teachers, identified 223 separate pieces of state legislation enacted in 45 states and the District of Columbia over the past three years aimed at improving reading outcomes. It is telling that New York is one of only five states (along with Hawaii, West Virginia, New Hampshire, and New Jersey) that has taken no action to either encourage or require “evidence-based” reading instruction. Many of these measures emphasize the importance of systematic phonics instruction or require schools to adopt specific phonics programs. Some mandate professional development in the science of reading and require schools to notify parents if their child is struggling with reading and to provide information about available interventions and resources. Still others require state teacher-preparation programs to ensure that future educators are trained in evidence-based reading instruction methods.

Some of these reading laws get remarkably granular: Three states, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Indiana, forbid teachers to use “three-cueing” in their classrooms. That’s the word-guessing technique I was trained to use with my struggling South Bronx stu-
Pitting ‘phonics’ against ‘whole language’ is a gross over-simplification that could do more harm than good and even scuttle the science-of-reading movement.

from a lack of explicit instruction to the idea that we have to teach it all,” he said. “Teachers just learned what ‘morphemes’ are and now they want to teach the kids about it. It’s like, ‘No, we’re supposed to be teaching them to read.’”

Perhaps the most significant risk is the common frame of the “reading war” itself, pitting “phonics” against “whole language.” It’s a gross oversimplification that could in the long run do more harm than good and even scuttle the emergent science-of-reading movement. Children need to learn phonics to “decode” and sound out words in a text, but the soul of reading is not decoding but reading comprehension—the ability to take meaning from text. Decoding is a skill. We can “read” made up words such as “brillig” and “slithy toves,” and even agree on their pronunciation once we have mastered the code of written language. But knowing what words *mean* is a much heavier lift. Reading comprehension is *not* a skill, like throwing a ball or riding a bike. This, too, I witnessed in my South Bronx classroom. I never had a single student who could not “decode.” But they all struggled to understand even simple reading passages.

Once children can decode with fluency, the difference between a “good” reader and a “bad” one tends to be the amount of background knowledge they possess and the size of their vocabulary. Reading research has demonstrated repeatedly that knowing a lot about a topic is a powerful aid to comprehension. In one oft-cited study, children who were ostensibly “poor” readers but knew a lot about baseball were much better able to understand and recall a passage about a baseball game than were “good” readers who lacked knowledge of the game. As E.D. Hirsch Jr. has pointed out for decades, a reading test is functionally a test of background knowledge. When children are reading on unfamiliar topics, they struggle.

The principal of my low-performing South Bronx elementary school, a Lucy Calkins acolyte, attributed our low test scores to “test anxiety,” because she saw children in the school engaged and performing reasonably well when reading books they choose for themselves and writing about their personal experiences. But when asked to read and write about unfamiliar subjects on state tests, they floundered, where more broadly educated children flourished. The tests were beside the point and painted in pain-fully sharp relief the injustice we did to students. Sacrificing science, history, and the arts to make more time for ineffective reading instruction was a double whammy. We spent more time on what wasn’t working and less time on the rich curricular content that might have helped kids build knowledge and vocabulary and become better readers. Many of my former students now have elementary-school-age children of their own. Reading scores haven’t budged since their parents’ school days.

In the final analysis, raising reading levels at scale—particularly among low-income children, minorities, and students who come to school speaking no English or who don’t grow up in language-rich homes with ample enrichment opportunities—requires a clear-eyed view of the complex nature of language proficiency. Phonics, while critical, is just the starting line. Reading comprehension is the long game. It requires patience and persistence, which are
not in great abundance among either K–12 students or politicians. This makes it difficult to be sanguine that the latest reading reformation will stick this time, or that the bad-practice zombies will remain in their crypts. Columbia University, it must be noted, did not put Lucy Calkins out of business. She has formed a new company, the Mossflower Reading and Writing Project, and taken most of her Teachers College army of coaches and consultants—and her lucrative publishing contracts—with her. Her “Units of Study” remains among the most widely used reading programs in U.S. elementary schools.

If scores on standardized tests of reading comprehension don’t show quick results—and paradoxically, they won’t if schools are getting instruction right—there will be predictable calls to dismiss the science-of-reading movement as just another failed edu-fad. There will be no shortage of reading-war dead-enders eager to say, “Phonics? Oh, we tried that. It didn’t work.”

The next turn of the wheel is almost foreordained.
ON THE GREAT balance sheet drawn up for digital culture noting its advantages and disadvantages, one item clearly on the debit side is what it has done to the bookshop, both the new bookshop and the used. America has never been overladen with bookshops, but today they have become even more scarce. Thank you, amazon.com, which has made it possible to purchase books quickly and often at impressive discounts. But if this is true, if Amazon has truly and sensibly supplanted the traditional bookshop, why bemoan the disappearance?

The problem is, it hasn’t, not really. I do not denigrate the online efficiency of amazon.com for purchasing new books, or Abebooks.com for purchasing used ones, but acquiring books off the Internet is not the same as shopping for them in stores filled with books. Acquiring a book online is a transaction. Buying one in a bookshop, a serious bookshop, is an experience. A big difference—and one, I fervently believe, that favors the bookshop.

I WAS NEVER in a bookshop before the age of 20. My happy boyhood, dominated by friends, sports, and movies, allowed little time for reading. In grade school I cheated on book reports, giving mine—on The Last of the Mohicans, David Copperfield, The Count of Monte Cristo—not from the reading of those thick tomes but from their Classic Comics versions. In high school, apart from assigned readings, most of which I found supremely boring, I chiefly read novels about slum and gang life: The Amboy Dukes, A Stone for Danny Fisher, Knock on Any Door, The Hoods. Dev-
Once my passion for reading had been ignited in Hyde Park, bookshops, both new and used, held a certain magic for me, a magic that they have never lost.

Americans, it turns out, have never been great readers. In “The Bookshop in America,” a 1963 essay, Edward Shils noted that in sample surveys on readership, “at any given time the United States is fairly far down on the list of literate countries as compared with the Scandinavian or the Low Countries or even England.” Shils added that “few universities have good bookshops within their environs, but for the most part college and university bookshops mainly carry textbooks.” As for the professoriate, “even university teachers, once they pass forty, are not heavy readers over a wide range of subjects.” Few professors, as I myself discovered from my time as a university teacher, read much outside their own academic specialties.

The bad news about the United States only gets worse. According to Jeff Deutsch, author of the recent In Praise of Good Bookstores, in 1994 there were 7,000 independent such shops in America; a quarter century later, that number had shrunk to 2,500, “and of those few bookstores left, even fewer sell books exclusively.” That was 2019. The number must be far lower today.

The first substantial bookshops I encountered were in Hyde Park, the neighborhood surrounding the University of Chicago, when I was a student there between 1956 and 1959. Along its main artery of 57th Street, Hyde Park had three used bookshops, and the university bookstore carried books by faculty and intellectual magazines. The Seminary Co-op Bookstore, housed in the basement of the university’s divinity school and likely the best academic bookstore in the world, was not founded until 1961. (For many years the Seminary Co-op was run by Jack Cella, a friend and a man whose astonishing competence was exceeded only by his impressive modesty.) My discovery of the serious bookshop was nicely coordinated with my discovery of the value of the reading life generally, the discovery that, through the agency of books, one could widen one’s perspective, expand one’s knowledge, and, yes, even deepen one’s experience, for to the serious reader, reading great books is itself a form of experience.

Once my passion for reading had been ignited, bookshops, both new and used, held a certain magic for me, a magic that they have never lost. The dictionary’s meaning of serendipity is “the occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way.” Bookshops, I soon learned, are where one goes to have serendipity happen. On this point, Jeff Deutsch quotes the critic Geoffrey O’Brien, who in his book The Browser’s Ecstasy wrote: “The unread book is the life yet to be lived, the promise that there will be new ideas, images never glimpsed. The paradise of futurity is the thousand-page book full of episodes still to come.”

My haunting of bookshops took off in the early 1960s when I worked in New York at a magazine called the New Leader, whose offices were on 15th Street just east of Fifth Avenue. Make that, more to the point, just west of Fourth Avenue, which in those days housed an impressive array of used bookshops. At my lunch break, I wandered in and out of these shops like a half-drunk sailor freshly arrived in port. Often, I would leave my wallet in my desk at the New Leader, taking only five or six dollars with me lest I blow the better part of my week’s salary on books.

The distinction between a collector and a connoisseur holds that a collector wants everything and a connoisseur only the best of things. In the realm of books, I never had the greedy impulse of the collector, but neither, in those early years, had I the subtle understanding required of the connoisseur. But browsing in serious bookstores over the years has, I like to think, turned me into a connoisseur of sorts.

As Deutsch, who since 2019 has been the director of the Seminary Co-op Bookstores, reminds us, the essential bookshop experience is the browsing experience. Browsing, he writes, originally meant “to chew cud, to ruminate... to say it more directly, browsing is a form of rumination.” He sets out the many forms of bookshop-browsing and types of browser, characterizing each: the flaneur, the town crier, the ruminator, the pilgrim, the devotee, the palimpsest, the chef, the initiate, the stargazer, the general, and the idler. The ideal bookshop is one set up for easy browsing. When the Seminary Co-op Bookstore moved from its divinity-school location a block or so to the east, the new shop was designed for easy browsing by the famous architect Stanley Tigerman, himself a serious reader and a man who understood, Deutsch writes, “that the good bookshop is about interiority. Deep in the browse, many of us move through the space as though we were inside the...
I seek books that I had not known about and that, once found, yield aesthetic pleasure, unsuspected knowledge, and the sense of getting just a touch wiser about the world.

Mind itself—of the universe or God, depending on one's fancy. And many of us turn inward as we do so, finding the space especially conducive to self-reflection.”

In my own browsing in bookstores, what am I seeking? No longer, like the librarians in Juan Luis Borges's story “The Library of Babel,” the catalogue of catalogues, the book that will explain the mysteries of the world. What I seek, and often find, are books that I had not known about, or knew about only dimly, and that, once found (more often in used than in new bookshops), yield aesthetic pleasure, unsuspected knowledge, and the sense of getting perhaps just a touch wiser about the world. In a nearby bookstore I not long ago found such book, *Rome and Pompeii*, by a writer hitherto unknown to me named Gaston Boissier; more recently I discovered Talents and Geniuses, a book of essays by Gilbert Highet, a writer I had known about but had never read. (Each cost less than $5.) The possession of certain books, Petrarch held, “provoques in us a longing for others.” I have since acquired four more of Boissier’s books and three more of Highet’s.

Which brings one to the difference between books in libraries and books in one's personal possession. Deutsch maintains that “libraries do not replace bookstores but complement them.” Library books are of course on loan, and so must be read fairly quickly, whereas books one owns may be read at leisure, sometimes months, years, even decades after one has acquired them. Books one owns can also be marked up, left with notes inserted in them, treated as one's property, which they are. “A certain intimacy is lost,” Deutsch notes, “when a book is unowned.”

Deutsch denotes the differences between the selling of books and other commodities. He makes the point that, in a strict sense, books are not really commodities. He cites Lewis Hyde, who in his book *The Gift* makes the distinction between the commodity and the gift: “A commodity has value and a gift does not. A gift has worth.” One can put a price on a commodity by comparing it with other commodities, but one cannot put a price on a gift. Publishers need to put a price on an elegant translation of Dante, a new edition of Schopenhauer, the million-and-a-half words of Proust. Used-bookshop owners later put a lower price on them. But to their readers, these books, and others in their class, are priceless.

Bookshops have a built-in inefficiency. They cannot be run like other businesses, not if they are to succeed in fulfilling the needs of their customers. Deutsch summarizes a study that sets out four rules a bookstore must observe if it is to succeed. First, “nearly 20 percent of a bookstore's inventory must consist of products that are not books,” like greeting cards, mugs, calendars, coffee. Second, “the books that are carried must be chiefly purchased from major presses that offer higher gross margins than small, independent, and scholarly presses.” Third, “bookstores must leave books on their shelves no longer than four months.” Fourth, “bookstores must pay booksellers the wages of an entry-level retail clerk.”

With the exception of the last item, a serious bookshop will adhere to none of these points. The Seminary Co-op, for example, carries a stock of roughly 100,000 books from all sorts of presses, carries books exclusively, and keeps books on its shelves much longer than four months. Deutsch reports that in the decade of the 2010s, “Seminary Co-op's sales increased by 27 percent, but its bottom line remained steady: an annual deficit of approximately $300,000.” He adds that most bookstores retain books on their shelves for an average period of 132 days, whereas Seminary Co-op keeps its books for 280 days. Books do not sell the way other things do. Serious books await their buyers, and these are often notable for taking their time to show up. As Deutsch writes, “books require patience at every level... if we measure them alongside more ephemeral products, we will necessarily elevate books of moment over books of all time.”

All this makes one wonder why anyone would wish to run a bookstore. “The wonder is, given the unremunerativeness of the business, that bookshops exist at all,” Edward Shils wrote in his essay. “It takes a special kind of person, somewhat daft in a socially useful and quite pleasant way but nonetheless somewhat off his head, to give himself to bookselling.” The only commonality among bookshop owners I have known is their apparent pleasure in being in close proximity to books. Otherwise, they have been a most motley lot.

One of the splendid used bookshops in Evanston was called Bookman’s Alley, the name deriving from its being located in an alley off the town’s main shopping street. It was run by a man named Roger Carlson, a
Edwards Shils’s phrase ‘somewhat daft’ doesn’t quite capture the two booksellers with whom I had fairly extensive dealings. ‘Quite daft’ comes closer to it.

former advertising-agency executive who, after fairly brief acquaintance, let one know he had had an alcohol problem. His demeanor was cheerful. His ample shop was decorated with military and athletic headgear and elegant tchotchkes. (Before he went out of business, to die soon after, I bought a small, white porcelain figurine of a couple in 18th-century garb—he standing playing the flute, she seated before a stand holding an open score playing the violin—which now sits in our living room.) Roger knew I was a writer, but, though our conversation always had an easy and pleasing flow, we never talked about books. But, then, oddly, few of the booksellers I have known seemed much interested in talking about books.

Shils’s phrase “somewhat daft” doesn’t quite capture the two booksellers with whom I had fairly extensive dealings. “Quite daft” comes closer to it. The first, Stuart Brent (né Brodsky), maintained a new bookstore along expensive Michigan Avenue in Chicago. Stuart was at least two stages beyond outspoken. I once entered his shop and asked how things were going with him. “How are they going?” he replied in a stentorian voice. “I’ll tell you how they’re going. The goyim are killing me.” By goyim I subsequently learned that he meant Waldenbooks, a shopping-mall book chain that he felt was taking business away from him. Not long after, the sales manager of W. W. Norton, in that day my publisher, asked me whether I knew Stuart Brent. When I said I did, he reported that the day before he had had a call from Stuart in answer to his message that Stuart was 90 days in arrears to Norton. “I’ll put a check in the mail tomorrow,” Stuart told him, adding, “By the way, it would help a great deal if you didn’t publish such sh—ty books.”

Brent must have done well enough to pay the high rent on his Michigan Avenue shop. He special-ordered books for many of the psychoanalysts and psychiatrists in the neighborhood, men he treated with an easy contempt. I was in his shop one day signing copies of a recent book of mine when one of them, a youngish man, came in to pick up a book he had ordered. Stuart also handed him a copy of my book. “Here,” he said. “Read this. Maybe you’ll learn something.” Another time I was supposed to come to sign what Stuart said were 200 copies of a new book of mine. I told him I couldn’t make it until the following Monday and would call him back then. When I did, he said, “Don’t bother, I sold all 200 copies.” True? With Stuart, who knew?

Truman Metzel ran Great Expectations Bookstore in the vicinity of Northwestern University. Heavy-set, slow-moving, Truman spoke carefully, his speech never quite free of a touch of pretension. Truman was said years before to have failed to complete a Ph.D. in philosophy under Richard McKeon, the editor of a complete edition of the works of Aristotle, at the University of Chicago. The city of Chicago in those days was said to have been strewn with academic corpses of graduate students who failed to complete their doctorates under the intellectual stringencies of Richard McKeon. Great Expectations was essentially an academic bookstore, heavily stocked with philosophy books. For a long while, on its front table was a book with the title Clarity Is Not Enough. I could never pass it without thinking, “But it’s a start.”

One day, Truman told me that the evening before he had kicked Saul Bellow out of his shop. Bellow had apparently asked about four or five novels that Truman did not carry. Finally, exasperated, Truman told Bellow, “Perhaps you would do better to take your custom elsewhere.”

When I began teaching at Northwestern, I always ordered the books for my courses through Truman, thinking he could use the business. I also thought it would be useful for students to have the experience, however glancing, of a serious bookstore. Three of them complained to me that the owner of the shop put them off by his icy manner. In one of the courses I taught, two of the books for the course, both from the firm of Harcourt Brace, never arrived. I asked Truman about it. “Oh,” he said, “I fear there has been a bit of contretemps between the publisher and me over a bill.” The books never arrived, and I had radically to alter my course. Truman, naturally, never apologized.

Today there is no Bookman’s Alley or Great Expectations in Evanston. What’s more, Borders and Barnes & Noble, which both had large stores in the center of town, are now also gone. A serious used bookshop called Amaranth remains, and so does a new one called Bookends and Beginnings. A store called Squeezebox, selling books and music and DVDs, remains in business. Stuart Brent Books long preceded its owner in death.
Jeff Deutsch claims that his *In Praise of Books* is a celebration, not a lament. Yet lamentable the condition of the serious bookstore sometimes seems. One thinks of the grand bookstores of an earlier era that remain open: Blackwell’s in Oxford, Heffers in Cambridge, Rizzoli in New York (which closed its Park Avenue shop), Tattered Cover in Denver, City Lights in San Francisco. Has Amazon by now badly dented them, too? It seems unlikely that it hasn’t.

Nothing presages a healthy future for the serious bookshop. Along with the incursions of Amazon, digital culture generally may already have had an even greater long-term effect in changing people’s reading habits. Reading on one’s phone or tablet or even computer is, somehow, different from reading the print in a book. A poem in pixels doesn’t seem like a poem at all. Then there are the nearly full-time distractions of social media. One goes online for information; one goes to books for knowledge. Style counts for little online; in a book it is of course often decisive. Impatient skimming rules online; one reads Thucydides, Pascal, Proust, Thomas Mann, and other writers of their stature at a rate of perhaps 15 or fewer pages an hour.

Does the doom of the bookshop really matter? After all, how many readers of the kind I have described as serious, to whom bookshops have traditionally catered, are there in America? These serious readers will doubtless survive without serious bookshops. But serious bookshops tended not only to the needs of serious readers; they also help to create future such readers, for from such shops one learns what is available in the larger world of literary and intellectual culture, and ends by becoming a serious reader oneself.

Edward Shils noted that there are four chief means of education: that available in the classroom, that in serious magazines and newspapers, that in the conversation of intelligent friends, and that to be found in new and used bookshops. Bookshops, serious bookshops, have for me been such a means, a superior graduate school, one I had hoped all my days to attend. Now, alas, I am not so sure.
As Ye Sowell, So Shall Ye Reap

Social Justice Fallacies
By Thomas Sowell
Basic Books, 224 pages

Reviewed by
Michael A. Woronoff

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TOMAS SOWELL released his first book over a half century ago. He was 40. In September, at the age of 93, he released Social Justice Fallacies, his 48th. It is a short book, only 130 pages of text, but as is typical of Sowell, it is rigorously researched, meticulously documented, and filled with profound truths, simply stated.

Sowell was born into a poor family in rural North Carolina at the beginning of the Depression. His father died before he was born. He had no memory of his mother, who died a few years later. Taken in by a great-aunt shortly after his birth, Sowell lived in the segregated South in a house with no electricity or running hot water. When he was nine, the family moved to Harlem. Much later, Sowell came to realize how fortunate he was to have been an only child doted on by four caring adults. This was an advantage, he later wrote, “that money can’t buy” and “expensive government programs cannot create.”

Sowell attended the famously selective Stuyvesant High School in New York, but his teenage years were tumultuous, and he dropped out as his family’s financial condition and interpersonal dynamics rapidly deteriorated. By the time he was 17, his family circumstances were so grim that a court ordered he be emancipated. He moved into a shelter for homeless boys, hiding a knife under his pillow for self-defense.

Sowell was drafted into the Marines in 1951 during the Korean War. After his discharge, he worked in Washington, D.C., briefly attending night school at Howard University. Seeking a more serious academic experience, he enrolled at Harvard, earning a degree in economics in 1958. He was 28. Sowell was equally disappointed with Harvard:

Perhaps any place with such an awesome reputation was bound to be something of a disappointment. What I most disliked about Harvard was that smug assumptions were too often treat-
ed as substitutes for evidence or logic,... Unquestionably, Harvard made a major contribution to both my intellectual and social development. But when time came to leave, I felt that it was not a moment too soon.

Sowell earned a master’s from Columbia in 1959 and, nine years later, a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, where he studied under the ‘27 Yankees of economics: Milton Friedman, George Stigler, Gary Becker, and Friedrich Hayek. Friedman later said, “The word ‘genius’ is thrown around so much that it’s becoming meaningless, but nevertheless I think Tom Sowell is close to being one.” Over the next 50 years, Sowell would become a renowned public intellectual and important defender of contemporary classical liberalism.

It might surprise some that Sowell, the ardent free marketeer and skeptic of government intervention, identified as a Marxist until his thirties. In his late teens, Sowell purchased a used set of encyclopedias and turned to an entry on Marx. The philosopher’s ideas about class struggle and economic inequality neatly explained the severe social and economic disparities Sowell saw in his community. Even a class taught by Milton Friedman could not shake Sowell’s views.

But Sowell, as he would throughout his life, relentlessly pursued the truth, tested his beliefs, and let evidence guide his conclusions. His turn from Marxism began in 1960 during a summer job at the U.S. Department of Labor. While conducting an analysis of the federally regulated sugar industry in Puerto Rico, Sowell observed that every time minimum wages were raised, employment fell. Sowell had previously supported minimum-wage laws, but he came to understand that mandatory minimum wages priced people out of jobs, thus hurting those the law was meant to protect. His bureaucratic colleagues were maddeningly indifferent to this fact, indicating to Sowell that their motives were more self-interested than altruistic.

These realizations led Sowell to reconsider his opinions on the proper role of government. He began to examine the gap between intended and actual effects of government policies implemented in the name of fairness. Studying real-world examples of Marxist economic systems, including the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc countries, he concluded that, regardless of intent, centrally planned economies inevitably result in inefficiency, scarcity, and economic stagnation.

In his quest to understand this inevitability, Sowell identified certain fallacies tainting the assumptions made by Marx and other social-justice advocates. Sowell explores these fallacies in his new book. He has covered this territory extensively before (including in the pages of this magazine), so those familiar with his previous work will recognize much in the book.* Still, *Social Justice Fallacies* serves as a useful sampler and update of his career-long examination of these assumptions and their flaws.

Sowell begins with a discussion of “Equal Chance Fallacies,” an idea he traces back to the 18th century and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau posited that, because nature endows all men equally, any inequality in outcomes must be imposed by man. In Sowell’s words,

At the heart of the social justice vision is the assumption that, because…disparities among human beings greatly exceed any differences in their innate capacities, these disparities are … proof of the effects of such human vices as exploitation and discrimination.

Or, as Ibram X. Kendi, director of the Center for Antiracist Research at Boston University, and author of the bestselling *How to Be an Antiracist*, has declared, “racial inequity is evidence of racist policy.”

Logicians call this “affirming the consequent.” Others call it lazy thinking. Just because A causes B does not mean that if B occurs, it was caused by A. B may have been caused by something else. If Mary has car sickness, she’ll have nausea. But if Mary has nausea, it isn’t inevitable that she has car sickness. Maybe she just ate a bad piece of fish.

Of course, human bias can be, and tragically has been, responsible for disparate results. But, as Sowell emphasizes, human bias is only one of innumerable factors that affect human outcomes. He

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*Myths About Minorities, August 1979*
commentary

Sowell provides extensive evidence that both of these views are fallacious. Differences in group outcomes are not always attributable to race, “either in the sense of being caused by genetics or being a result of racial discrimination.” He highlights several other factors that may lead to disparate outcomes, including differences among groups in the proportion of single-parent households, education levels, and, as noted above, median age.

After examining erroneous beliefs about the causes of disparities, Sowell turns his attention to fallacious assumptions regarding the best action to take when confronting these disparities. “Chess Pieces Fallacies” occur when a decision-maker implements a policy based solely on the intent behind it, thus ignoring the rational reactions of those subject to the policy.

During her presidential campaign, Senator Elizabeth Warren proposed an “Ultra-Millionaire Tax” to fight income inequality. California Assembly member Alex Lee introduced a similar wealth-tax proposal in California. In January, in an effort to increase the supply of affordable housing, the Biden administration directed the Federal Housing Finance Agency to examine ways to limit “egregious rent increases.” This year alone, 27 states increased their minimum wage in an effort to ensure all workers a living wage.

The primary aim of each of these policies is the confiscation and redistribution of wealth, whether directly, through taxation, or indirectly, through measures such as price controls, minimum-wage laws, and the like, all in the name of benefiting some harmed group. Sowell explains that these programs are worse than ineffective, often harming those they intend to benefit, because “people are not just inert chess pieces.” They react to the rules imposed upon them. Raising tax rates often decreases the amount of taxes paid by the rich, who will take steps to reduce their taxable income and assets. Imposing rent controls lowers the supply of low-cost housing, as landlords shutter existing properties and build fewer new units.

Perhaps even more insidious, by lowering the economic burden of discrimination, these policies may increase discriminatory behavior. Sowell explains that in an unfettered market, discrimination is costly to the discriminator. For example, by eliminating a class of people from the available pool, a discriminating employer artificially reduces the supply of potential employees. Reducing supply increases labor costs. As a result, employers who indulge their discriminatory impulses will have higher costs than their competitors, which actually provides them an incentive to ignore those impulses. When the government imposes a minimum wage, it drives up the cost of labor, so the additional cost of discriminating is reduced or eliminated, leading to a higher incidence of discrimination.

Finally, Sowell explores what he deems the most consequential question when addressing social-justice matters:

For many social issues, the most important decision is who makes the decision. Both social justice advocates and their critics might agree that many consequential social decisions are best made by those who have the most relevant knowledge. But they have radically different assumptions as to who in fact has the most knowledge.

Sowell believes that “Knowledge Fallacies” lead social-justice advocates to conclude wrongly that deci-
sions by the collective will be superior to those made by individuals. He quotes a plethora of leftists, from Rousseau (comparing the masses to “a stupid pusillanimous invalid”) to Ralph Nader (who believed that “the consumer must be protected at times from his own indiscretion and vanity”), all expressing a distrust (or disdain) of the individual and a corresponding belief that elites, in the form of government, must protect the public from itself. A modern example: Kendi proposes to amend the U.S. Constitution to establish a Department of Anti-racism that would be “responsible for preclearing all local, state and federal public policies to ensure they won’t yield racial inequity.”

But these progressives vastly overestimate the ability of central planners to gather and process information regarding our complex and dynamic world. Building on the work of Hayek, Sowell notes that human knowledge is limited, dispersed, and context-specific. No individual or group can possess all the consequential information essential for the functioning of society. Rather, “coordination among innumerable people with innumerable fragments of consequential knowledge” is required. This means centralized decision-making will inevitably lead to erroneous decisions, misallocation of resources, and unintended adverse consequences. Too often this includes a loss of individual freedom, as underinformed elites, at no cost to themselves, override the will of the individuals affected by their decisions.

The fallacies Sowell examines throughout his book highlight the overwhelming hubris exhibited by those who blindly pursue a social-justice agenda. It is not wrong to observe that life is unfair, or that gross inequality exists throughout the world. This is obvious to many across the ideological spectrum. What causes this and what to do about it are less obvious and depend on clear thinking and a deep understanding of the facts. But the fallacies to which social-justice advocates are inclined lead them to misidentify the causes of, and misjudge the consequences of their responses to, the state of the world. Mere ignorance would not be fatal, however, if they were willing to challenge their theories and change their minds when warranted. Thomas Sowell was once a Marxist, after all. The danger posed by today’s social-justice warriors is their absolute unwillingness to test their beliefs with evidence and logic, and their utter hostility to those who dare to challenge their views. As a result, they adopt policies and programs that make things worse, sometimes catastrophically.

At the end of his book, Sowell asks:

What are those of us who are not followers of the social justice vision and its agenda to do? At a minimum, we can turn our attention from rhetoric to the realities of life… [It] is especially important to get facts, rather than catchwords. These include not only current facts, but also the vast array of facts about what others have done in the past—both the successes and the failures.

Social Justice Fallacies is a work filled with common sense, clear thinking, and clarion insights, all backed up by a vast array of facts. Like everything Sowell writes, it presents the world the way it is, rather than the way we might wish it would be.

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Say Their Names

*Kabul: The Untold Story of Biden’s Flasco and the American Warriors Who Fought to the End*  
By Jerry Dunleavy and James Hasson  
Center Street, 368 pages  
Reviewed by Noam Blum

Noam Blum is chief technology officer at Tablet. He served in an intelligence unit in the Israel Defense Forces.

The lead-up to the second anniversary of the U.S.’s disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan was peppered with some surprising stories in the usually Democrat-friendly mainstream media, with headlines like “Biden administration struggling with how to mark anniversary of chaotic Afghanistan withdrawal” and “2 years on, Afghanistan withdrawal continues to cast pall on Biden administration” from outlets such as CNN and ABC News. These struggles and palls, however, were nowhere to be found in President Biden’s official statement on “the Second Anniversary of Ending the Afghanistan War.” His pro forma comments from August 31 mention the withdrawal itself only in passing, citing the “resolve and bravery” of those involved, and tout-
Commentary

For those who read Kabul: The Untold Story of Biden’s Fiasco and the American Warriors Who Fought to the End, this attitude will come as no shock. The surprise bestseller currently is with forgetting about disaster he was precipitating as he plans to commemorate the 13 service members who died in the Kabul airport attack.

Jean-Pierre directed reporters to a perfunctory statement released by the president on the anniversary of the Abbey Gate bombing in Kabul on August 26, 2021, which briefly honored the memory of the 13 service members who died without mentioning their names.

The book zooms in on the situation at Hamid Karzai International Airport, to which U.S. forces had retreated for the final evacuation, abandoning the Taliban their far more defensible stronghold at Bagram Air Base. Absurdly, the U.S. also struck a deal with the Taliban to assist in providing security at the airport—despite widespread evidence of ties between its Haqqani Network and the Islamic State Khorasan group (ISIS-K). The suicide bomber who struck Abbey Gate at the airport on August 26, ISIS-K member Abdul Rahman Al Logari, had been released from imprisonment at Bagram by the Taliban just days before the attack. In addition to killing 13 U.S. service members, the suicide bombing killed nearly 200 Afghans in the throng crowding the gate in a desperate attempt to board a plane out of the country. Despite numerous independent confirmations of the bomber’s identity, U.S. officials still refuse to name him to this day, apparently fearing that his affiliation and the circumstances of his release would reflect negatively on their conduct.

Kabul’s harrowing account of the bombing is made even more infuriating when considered alongside the book’s narrative about the preceding weeks. For instance, U.S. and allied intelligence repeatedly warned of ISIS-K activity after the fall of Kabul on August 16, culminating in a warning issued by U.S. diplomats to Americans in Kabul to leave the area around the airport because of credible threats only hours prior to the attack. A Marine sniper interviewed for the book said his team had even spotted the bomber in the crowd but received no authorization to fire on him. “To this day, we believe he was the suicide bomber,” the sniper said. “Plain and simple, we were ignored.”

Kabul shows how aware those at the top were of the increasing danger to U.S. forces and Afghan civilians. Despite endless administration claims that they were prepared and ready to complete the withdrawal leading up to and during the final days of August, the reality was starkly different. Troops arriving at the airport to support the withdrawal effort found themselves needing to hot-wire abandoned vehicles, bring their own food and water, and place first-aid mannequins in guard towers to disguise their lack of manpower. They were also hampered by ridiculous restrictions on operations as a result of Covid measures imposed on troops. Covid mandates left units without key members, such as a surgeon for one medical unit at the airport; he was unvaccinated and therefore left behind to provide “support from Bahrain.” Soldiers were forced to wear cloth masks in blazing heat while wearing 60 pounds of gear, and quarantine and contact-tracing rules made manpower management a nightmare. Covid protocols had also led to horrendous backups in processing Special Immigrant Visas for Afghan allies at the U.S. Embassy in Kabul in the months prior.

The complete breakdown of evacuation efforts also led to a surreal reality in which veterans’ groups and networks found themselves forced to spring into action independently, using connections and assets secured through private financing to run extraction opera-
tions and get allies and their families to the airport. Without the valiant efforts of these groups, many more would have been abandoned to the Taliban.

And still, many were abandoned to the Taliban. The administration concluded on August 17 that there are as many as 15,000 Americans remaining in Afghanistan. Despite evacuating only 6,000 of them by the time the last U.S. military aircraft departed the airport, administration officials repeatedly touted their success, claiming again and again that only 100 to 200 Americans who actually wanted to leave still remained in the country. Officials were never forced to reconcile these statements with the information that more than 900 Americans were later extracted between September 2021 and March 2022. Hundreds more found their way out via nongovernmental clandestine operations run by former Special Forces and intelligence operatives and financed by wealthy private individuals. Many others are still there to this day.

With the U.S. gone, the Taliban was left to pursue its restoration of an Islamist theocracy to Afghanistan, which it did with brazen vigor. But the book’s final parts lay bare the larger geopolitical fallout. In the face of American weakness and failure, Vladimir Putin was emboldened to move forward with Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, while Xi Jinping increased China’s efforts to insert itself into Afghanistan via his Belt and Road Initiative and to ratchet up Chinese actions and rhetoric regarding Taiwan. The authors present a grim warning on future tragedies that the Biden administration’s conduct may have already wrought.

Dunleavy and Hassan close by doing what Biden has never done. They name the 13 victims of the Abbey Gate bombing: Marine Lance Corporal David L. Espinoza, Marine Sergeant Nicole Gee, Marine Staff Sergeant Darin Taylor Hoover, Army Staff Sergeant Ryan Christian Knauss, Marine Corporal Hunter Lopez, Marine Lance Corporal Rylee J. McCollum, Marine Lance Corporal Dylan R. Merola, Marine Lance Corporal Kareem Nikoui, Marine Corporal Daegan W. Page, Marine Sergeant Johanny Rosario Pichardo, Marine Corporal Humberto A. Sanchez, Marine Lance Corporal Jared M. Schmitz, and Navy Corpsman Maxton W. Soviak. The authors urge us to not look away, to not forget, and to not ignore the looming dangers to come.

In a very real sense, this book stands as a monument. It is a monument to those who tragically lost their lives in the suicide bombing on August 26; to the resourcefulness, quick thinking, and dedication of the troops on the ground at Hamid Karzai International Airport; and to the veterans’ groups and networks that worked tirelessly and voluntarily to rescue as many people as they could. But it also serves as a monument to the failure of senior officials to heed multiple warnings in the months leading up to the withdrawal, and to the ultimate father of the preventable disaster—President Joe Biden.

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**Too Much Freedom**

**The Individualists: Radicals, Reactionaries, and the Struggle for the Soul of Libertarianism**

By Matt Zwolinski and John Tomasi
Princeton University Press
432 pages

Reviewed by Tal Fortgang

Tal Fortgang is a lawyer living in Washington, D.C.

E VERY SOCIAL movement, no matter how iconoclastic, has its traditions. The live-free-or-die hard-liners who gathered at the 2016 Libertarian Party presidential-candidate debate honored one of their traditions when they booed their eventual nominee, Gary Johnson. On the stage with Johnson were Austin Petersen (an activist who later defected to the Republicans) and Darryl Perry, a talking head who co-founded the New Hampshire Liberty Party. Moderator Larry Elder (currently seeking the Republican nomination for president) asked, “Should someone have to have a government-issued license to drive a car?”

Petersen: “Hell, no!”

Perry: “What’s next, requiring a license to make toast in your own damn toaster?” Raucous applause.

Johnson, circumspect: “A license to drive? You know, I’d like to see some competency exhibited by people before they drive...” The crowd’s boos cut off any further answer. Johnson, who had been governor of New Mexico for eight...
years, offered only an “I’m just sayin’” shrug in his defense. (Petersen later met a mix of cheers and boos when he announced some contours of his ideal drug policy: “You should not be able to sell heroin to a five-year-old.”)

Libertarians have long believed, as Barry Goldwater articulated, that moderation in defense of liberty is no virtue. Fervent denunciations of insufficiently dedicated paladins in the battle for freedom are part of their heritage.

Take, for instance, the arch-individualist author Ayn Rand, responding to some economists’ work on the effects of rent-control policies in 1946. “Not one word about the inalienable right of landlords and property owners,” Rand bristled. “Not one word about any kind of principles. Just expediency…and humanitarian…concern for those who can find no houses.” The economists were free-market giants Milton Friedman and George Stigler, and their paper actually criticized rent-control policies for failing to make housing more affordable.

That is one of many comical anecdotes from the colorful annals of libertarian history, but there is a serious point to it. In some sense, Friedman and Stigler were helping their social-engineer opponents by pointing out flaws in their argument. Their refutation of rent-control policies was consequentialist. Its main point was that the politics would produce unintended consequences, rather than arguing from principle that rent-control policies would be immoral even if they worked as they were intended to. And while it is obviously callous to say this, Rand’s dismissiveness of “humanitarian concern” for the homeless actually does work as a legitimate critique of those who claim to be dispassionate analysts of political and economic problems.

This represents the key division running through the delightful new book The Individualists, a fabulous intellectual history from Matt Zwolinski and John Tomasi, two sympathetic biographers of the ideology who nonetheless acknowledge that their co-ideologists can be a bit impractical, even zany. On one side of the divide stand true-believer libertarians operating from first principles, moved by categorical convictions about right and wrong and working their way through life by applying their hard-and-fast rules. On the other are the fainthearted—classical liberals, some Old Whigs or American conservatives, some individualist progressives—willing to trade off competing social, economic, and political goods. Small differences can look like major betrayals, as the Rand anecdote illustrates, when an erstwhile libertarian compromises what his fellow travelers consider an inviolable principle.

According to Zwolinski and Tomasi, the six “key commitments” of libertarians are “property rights, negative liberty [freedom from unjustified interferences], individualism, free markets, a skepticism of authority, and a belief in the explanatory and normative significance of spontaneous order.” If these sound mostly like the principles Americans used to hear from conservative Republicans during the High Reagan Era, that is because they are. As Ronald Reagan himself concluded: “I believe the very heart and soul of conservatism is libertarianism.”

Many conservatives have disagreed with that characterization, since it gives short shrift to the role of tradition (especially religion) and other forms of non-spontaneous order that keep societies safe and functional. But more fundamentally, what has separated libertarians from classical-liberalism-inflected conservatives is whether their principles are treated as imperatives or merely important values to keep in mind when engaged in prudent statecraft.

Zwolinski, a philosophy professor at the University of San Diego, and Tomasi, the president of Heterodox Academy, are not conservatives—and they take pains to show that the alliance between strict libertarians and conservatives was not inevitable. In their radicalism, libertarians have just as often supported movements associated with the progressive left, such as the abolition of various inherited institutions they deemed unjust. These include, for some, capitalism as practiced in America. Though it may strike the contemporary ear as paradoxical, some radical individualists toyed with economic arrangements such as “mutualism,” a semi-socialist position the authors describe as the belief that “the only legitimate property is that rooted in continued occupancy and use.” Mutualism draws heavily from some of those key commitments. It would erase existing distinctions between classes of individuals, and in a sense would make enforcing property rights easier. Yet it turns capitalist assumptions about the essential elements of free enterprise on its head by the way it would prevent the accumulation of capital and efficient allocation through investment. In its radical rethinking of basic economic arrangements—and its conclusion that something near to Marx’s “from each according to his ability” is fairer than capitalism, mutualism is undeniably progressive.

This is just one example of what you get when brilliant people, moved by a set of general convictions about what is good and just, try to design an ideal society from scratch. But as such an example
suggests, strict libertarian ideas often fail the same commonsense test that progressive utopian dreams do, because they proceed from ideas rather than experience. By distrusting inherited institutions and social arrangements, which incorporate a society’s experience through the generations, strict libertarianism systematically downplays the great intangible, undefinable factor that shapes our politics and culture: human nature. As Zwolinski and Tomasi demonstrate, libertarians have all kinds of ideas about what humans are in essence. Some, with Jean-Jacque Rousseau, believe that human beings are fundamentally good but become corrupted by organized society. Many of the anarchists featured in the book fall into this camp, if only implicitly. Others agree with Christians that mankind is fundamentally fallen and organized society is an exercise in taming our natural impulses. Some of the more conservative libertarians, such as the social theorist Friedrich Hayek (at least in some phases of his long academic career), have this consideration in mind as they try to work out the meaning and purpose of the rule of law to refine citizens.

But regardless of whether the libertarians conclude that people are fundamentally good or bad, the trouble with an ideological approach to politics is that people are complex. As the wisest libertarians have always understood, for a grand theory of justice to work as a polity’s first principle, it must incorporate a rich account of human nature to avoid the classic pitfall of unintended consequences. Many such libertarians tend to play up the notion of “spontaneous order,” or the idea that norms such as prices or social cues emerge organically for good reason. Naturally, they tend to be supportive of capital-
imism’s continued presence in capitalist societies and are skeptical that other arrangements resonate with the all-too-human realities of self-interest and general decency. Rule by radicals tends to end badly because of some mismatch between the way people actually behave and the way the rule makers thought (or hoped) they would.

Between the lines of The Individualists lurks this important point. The great advantage of a conservative disposition as compared with a libertarian one is that conservatism incorporates the inarticulable complexity of human experience. Even conservatives sympathetic to classical-liberal ideas, and I am among their number, want those ideas tempered by the norms and traditions that have proved their worth through their long tradition of existence.

The Individualists is a clarifying work that both explains and demonstrates how libertarianism operates as a coherent philosophy and how it differs from other members of its philosophical family. Its authors write with a palpable love of ideas and even of the sometimes-goofy, often-curmudgeonly characters who propagated them—and who find the idea of a driver’s license a license to totalitarianism.

The Political
Is Personal

Mom Rage: The Everyday Crisis of Modern Motherhood
By Minna Dubin
Seal Press, 245 pages

Reviewed by
Naomi Schaefer Riley

IN CAITLIN SHETTERLY’S recent novel, Pete and Alice in Maine, a New York City couple flees their home with their two young children in the early days of the pandemic. The timing is unfortunate, though, as Alice has recently discovered Pete’s infidelity. The book turns into a series of reflections by Alice about the impossibility of her situation. But soon her complaints start to take an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink tone. Suddenly she is not just upset about the pandemic or the lockdowns or her marriage. Alice tells her therapist, “I’m so angry all the time… I’m like Sandra Bullock in that movie. Everything about the last few years—Trump and Brett Kavanaugh and #MeToo and George Floyd and Pete and this whole disgusting system of racism and sexism and there’s no space anywhere, ever. Everyone’s on top of each other, stinking up the bathroom, dirtying dishes.”

Knowingly or not, Shetterly has her finger on the pulse of a very specific subset of mostly progressive women who seem addicted to public utterances about the torment of their lives. What sets

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these kvetches apart is that they mix their own personal burdens—their marital problems, misbehaving children, and frustrations with work—with what they see as the political burdens of America. Like a certain type of busybody who wants to tell you how bad things are because her mother-in-law’s cousin has just been diagnosed with liver disease, these women claim all the world’s problems for themselves.

Little wonder, then, that they are angry. In *Mom Rage: The Everyday Crisis of Modern Motherhood*, a San Francisco writer named Minna Dubin tries to describe this anger and offer some solutions for how to fix it. Based on an essay that Dubin wrote for the *New York Times* a couple of years ago called “The Rage Mothers Don’t Talk About,” the book suggests the problem here is a kind of social pandemic that mirrors the pandemic we just came out of.

The premise of the book is so absurd that its very existence—the fact a publisher wanted to publish it—is telling. *Mom Rage* pathologizes the human condition itself. Is it possible to find a mother of young children who does not, on occasion, rant about how her children are driving her crazy, or how she felt guilty for losing her temper with her child, or how her husband seems ignorant of what is going on around him? This is the way of all mothers from time immemorial. But Dubin is a new kind of mother—a mommy-blog mother. Since their emergence in the early 2000s, the mommy-blog mothers have taken navel-gazing to levels of intensity more akin to horror fiction than to rueful reflections on the way we live now.

WE CAN START examining the meta-meaning of all this complaining by trying to separate the things Dubin is angry about in her own life from the things in society at large that are making her angry. This is something, I should say, Dubin does not do herself. She has a son who is on the autism spectrum. He didn’t sleep for a long time when he was a baby, and, as an older child, his behavior has made it difficult for Dubin and her husband to find the right school for him. Until recently, it was all but impossible to leave him unsupervised. This must be a trying situation, to say the least, and any mother—whether she is at home full-time or trying to work—would find it difficult.

But Dubin has also made her own life harder. She decided, for instance, that she wanted to make all her own baby food. She also apparently made the choice when giving birth to skip an epidural. Many of these choices are explained by Dubin’s decision to live in San Francisco, where mothers are rewarded for using cloth diapers and engage in other labor-intensive, environmentally virtuous but completely silly uses of their time.

Dubin blames these decisions not on her progressive friends, but on what she calls the “scam of motherhood” created by motherhood’s “PR team.” In Dubin’s view, there is a society-wide conspiracy to get women (or “birthing people,” as she occasionally refers to us) to think of motherhood as a wonderful state of being that women are uniquely suited to because of nature, and that they should engage in various acts of martyrdom for their husbands and children.

So while women may think they have a choice about having children or determining who takes care of them and how, they have actually been bamboozled by the patriarchy into thinking that motherhood is great—and that they have to uphold its very high standards. It’s similar, says Dubin, to the “PR team for white supremacy.”

Oddly, this arrangement—the one where the burden of mothering falls on women—is, in Dubin’s estimation, only a recent phenomenon. Which brings me to my biggest question about *Mom Rage*: Did this book have an editor? And what happened when that person came upon the following passage without so much as a footnote: “In the Middle Ages, European mothers were not seen as containing some supreme maternal instinct that better suited them for child-rearing. Fathers and mothers shared parenting duties equally.”

As someone who regularly reads the complaints of modern feminists about how difficult the life of modern women is, I’d thought I’d seen everything, but I was nonetheless shocked to find that now they are pining for the *Middle Ages*. Ahh, the good old days when your
father married you off, you were pregnant at 14, and if you survived childbirth, you could—what?—depend on your husband to watch the kids while you tilled the field or wrote freelance articles?

But back to the rage. The real challenge for Dubin is not the daily difficulties she has finding time for writing while her two young children need her attention (though this is when her rage typically manifests itself). Nor is it the anger she experiences when she and her husband disagree about how to raise their children. These are all the sources of rage above the surface. But Dubin argues that in order to understand “mom rage,” we need to look at the “basement” of women’s lives.

It is rage at the “system” that has led modern women to lose their minds. Take, for instance, “America’s high maternal death rate,” which Dubin says is a “symptom of a dehumanizing capitalist health care system mired in patriarchy, white supremacy, ableism, and homophobia.” She notes that “76,000 birthing people die each year from preeclampsia,” a largely preventable condition.

She doesn’t mention, though, that only about 700 of those deaths took place in the United States.

The solution to all this will surprise no one who has read a tract on American motherhood in recent years. Dubin calls for more paid maternity and paternity leave, as well as better and cheaper health care. She’d like to end our oppressive capitalist system and ensure more access to contraception and abortion. Until all that happens, the rage will be completely justified.

Because Dubin is a white, educated, middle-class Jewish woman, she seems self-conscious in complaining about her life. She wants readers to know that she, too, is a victim. For instance, it may seem that she is just living in a typical privileged heterosexual nuclear family, but she is actually bisexual. A few years back, when she was out in public with her husband, she felt as if she was “acting” (which added to the rage). In fact, “the performance became more intense with the role of wife, and it felt like I was getting nailed into straightness with the role of Mother.” So she decided to reveal her sexual orientation on social media. Then her husband “realized he was queer, too, which made me feel less lonely in my skin, and gave us an exciting new connection point that we used to grow our queer community.” I’m sorry... what? And then she adds, “For mothers in the throes of matrescence, I recommend the transformative power of creative practice. I also recommend Queerness, but that’s neither here nor there.” No kidding.

Speaking of queerness, if we cannot somehow get the American government to provide unlimited leave for new mothers and fathers, or get fathers to take on more of the “emotional labor” of motherhood, we should at least explore “alternative family structures” that will give mothers the support they need. For instance, one mother Dubin interviewed recommends “ENM,” which stands for ethical non-monogamy. When her daughter had trouble with her math homework, she just went to her boyfriend’s wife, who happened to be a mathematician!

The book contains interviews with women of other races and classes who are also enraged. Sometimes frighteningly so. One mother who has adopted two black foster children is clearly overwhelmed by all of the trauma they suffered before coming to live with her and by the accompanying behavioral and developmental problems they’re experiencing. But her concerns about the rest of the world are interfering with her ability to be a rational parent. “When the kids would reach for gum at a grocery store, Zaara would angrily scream, ‘Don’t touch that!’” Her fear: “If you touch that they’re going to assume you stole it, you’re gonna be arrested, the police are going to kill you.” She told Dubin that when she was raging, “I wasn’t reacting to an eight-year-old who doesn’t feel like doing math because it’s boring. I was reacting to ‘Oh my god, you’re going to be homeless because you’re not going to finish college.’”

I really hope this mother is seeking professional help, and I wonder whether she should be caring for these children at all. But the sentiments she is expressing are becoming all too common. Feminism has a long history of arguing that the personal is political. But the reverse, that the political is always personal, seems to be on the rise.

The fact that these women believe that the situation in our country is so dire, that black children are being shot by police for picking up gum, that our health-care system is so bad that we are regularly leaving pregnant women to die of preventable causes, that they should look to the Middle Ages for enlightenment, is becoming a mass delusion of conspiracy theory?

And how many believe that motherhood is really a “scam”? At one point, Dubin interviews a woman named Eloise who has two children and also cares for her aging father-in-law. It’s clear she is stressed out, even with her husband’s help. But she says, “I grew up with a mother always taking care of somebody. I don’t want that to be what my kids think of with me.” Why not? Most mothers would be thrilled if that’s how their children were to remember them. But it wouldn’t leave much time for freelance writing. Or rage.
A TENACIOUS debate in intellectual circles in recent years has centered on the question of whether the most pressing threat to liberal democracy comes from the illiberal right or the illiberal left. One of the more compelling exchanges on this front took place in the summer of 2020 between the liberal philosopher Yascha Mounk and the conservative historian Niall Ferguson on Mounk’s website, Persuasion.

Just months before the leader of the Republican Party tried to overthrow a free and fair election, Mounk argued that the right’s turn toward authoritarian populism remained far and away the principal threat to established democracies from India to Hungary to the United States. Ferguson argued that the lingering danger posed by Donald Trump and other nationalist demagogues was overstated but that authoritarian progressives were on the march. To Ferguson’s mind, the “woke” phenomenon and the takeover of education and other cultural institutions by American Red Guards would prove the true menace to liberal democracy.

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Mounk’s New Conviction

The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time
By Yascha Mounk
Penguin Press, 416 pages

Reviewed by Brian Stewart

In Our Time

The identity synthesis has come to exert tremendous influence over public life in a remarkably short span of time. Its illiberal premises and principles are exacerbated by the sheer intolerance of its methods. It seeks not merely to narrow the circle of human sympathy by encouraging everyone to see the world through the ever-present prism of identity; it also forthrightly rejects Enlightenment values and neutral rules such as free speech. By treating innocent bystanders and other outsiders with extreme prejudice, it hopes to coerce humanity into adopting a radical vision of all that is right and good. Unsurprisingly, the growing acceptance of identitarian nostrums has been attended by an increasingly censorious culture that stifles individuals’ ability to engage in dialogue and debate about crucial social and cultural matters.

In contrast to some more conservative works that take aim at this progressive fixation, The Identity Trap does not suggest that so-called wokeness is a form of “cultural Marxism.” If Mounk is right—and I believe he is—those endeavoring to discover the true roots of the identity synthesis will learn in his book that it is distinguished by its rejection of grand narratives, including both liberalism and Marxism, by postmodern thinkers such as Michel Foucault. And it harbors contempt for the values of the civil-rights movement, including the ideal of racial integration, as illustrated by critical race theorists such as Derrick Bell.

For Mounk, there is reason to think the identity synthesis will burn itself out. Such optimism is rare among critics of identity politics, who tend to believe that normal forms of persuasion stand little chance of success in the face of a cause buoyed by abundant supplies of self-pity and self-righteousness.
In addition to holding a default belief that people undergo various ideological changes over time, Mounk claims to have already witnessed people in left-wing circles freeing themselves from the identity trap. Alas, a mass transformation along these lines would seem more a naive wish than a possible reality, given the religious quality of the fervor with which “the Elect” (to purloin John McWhorter’s term for these identitarians) have embraced their cause. How can they possibly jettison the faith now without condemning themselves as the moral equivalent of heretics?

This latest progressive ideology placing outsize emphasis on racial and sexual identity and radical ideas about gender, like all the others, tries to remake the world. Although Mounk firmly grasps this reality and proposes to offer a thoroughgoing critique of the identity synthesis, he often understates the case. He argues, for instance, that “at the heart of its vision” stands “an acceptance” of the enduring importance of dubious categories like race. The problem with the identity synthesis, however, is not its meek “acceptance” of inherited and immutable characteristics such as race but rather a belligerent insistence that those characteristics continue to define and defile the human experience.

Mounk does not flinch from recognizing the past—and present—inhjustices that have blighted the lives of so many individuals and groups around the world, including in the most advanced Western societies. But he maintains that it’s possible to acknowledge the full force of these injustices, and earnestly attempt to remedy them, without succumbing to the identity synthesis. For our sake, it better be. The alternative to that parochial spirit may sound quaint in our day, but it remains as revolutionary as it was when it was first declared: philosophical liberalism. That old creed is based on the rejection of natural hierarchy and the assertion—in Jefferson’s imperishable phrase—that human beings are “created equal.” That old creed has not only issued pretty words and precepts about liberty and equality. It also has a proven track record of generating more freedom and dignity, affluence and security, than any other system since the beginning of recorded history.

Liberalism is much maligned these days on both the left and the right. It is scorned by the crowd that populates much of the nation’s permanent governing class and its academic establishment. It is held in open contempt by most of the people who control its news and cultural output. Much of the managerial elite has turned away in the hopes of capturing increased market share.

But the ideals and institutions of liberalism remain the best possible source of moral and material progress. It contains an altogether more ambitious and ennobling set of aspirations for the human future than any other ideology on offer. To the extent that neither party has been a loyal steward of that tradition of late, the parlor game of determining which side is worse has been a misguided exercise obscuring the need to fight both.

The fact that an ideology diametrically opposed to philosophical liberalism and the American experiment has been adopted almost overnight in the highest echelons of society is prima facie evidence that something has gone terribly wrong in the American elite. Yascha Mounk’s The Identity Trap is one potent antidote—not the first and, let us hope, not the last, either.
recovering from 146 days of total inactivity, it’s pretty clear that the “major” contraction in 2008 is about to seem quaintly “mini.” Since May 2, 2023, when the strike was called, the assorted CEOs, bankers, investors, and money-suppliers who have kept Hollywood in an unrestrained spending frenzy for the past decade or so haven’t had much to do. So while the writers marched around the studio gates holding up signs with catchy slogans, their counterparts in the executive suites had time to reflect on the madness of building about 100 new streaming services that no one is watching and producing 600 scripted television shows that no one can find.

The best way to measure the difference between the entertainment industry in 2008 and the industry today is to examine the changing nature of the production company. In the early 2000s, the “companies” were just names on a contract and figments of the creative imagination of the producers. They had no assets and no independent value. They were a flattering way to describe a very old Hollywood relationship: a writer under contract.

For the past few years, a very different kind of production company has emerged. Maybe some of these names sound familiar. The Duke and Duchess of Sussex have a production company valued at $100 million, which is about $20 million more than Higher Ground Productions, which is owned by Michelle and Barack Obama. Sports figures such as LeBron James, Steph Curry, and Peyton Manning have production companies of their own, with LeBron’s topping around $700 million in valuation. Most famously, Reese Witherspoon’s Hello Sunshine Productions was valued at $900 million.

And by “valuation” I don’t mean some hypothetical vanity valuation. No, all of those names—and many, many others—received huge investments from private-equity shops, entertainment conglomerates, and deep-pocketed investors in the expectation that a company helmed by a famous name would generate big hits and dependable profits.

This wasn’t a crazy idea. In a world of 600 scripted shows on television, you need something to stand out and cut through the clutter. This is what drove the studio system from the 1920s to the 1960s, when movie studios kept a stable of stars on the payroll. More stars than there are in the heavens was how MGM described itself. And when Hollywood was releasing 2,000 movies per year, and theater marquees were stacked with titles, it mattered who was starring in what. We’re facing the same overproduction challenges now. And that’s why famous names and faces still deserve the big bucks.

But not the insane bucks. If you look at the actual economic performance of many of these talent-driven production companies, the results are lackluster and (mostly) hitless. Paying his contract stars gigantic salaries made sense for Louis B. Mayer. Valuing Reese Witherspoon’s Hello Sunshine at nearly $1 billion (as private-equity outfit Blackstone did in 2021) leads to what an entertainment industry investor described to me as “very sad math.”

What happened between 2008 and 2023 was that a lot of people—investors, financiers, and talented actors and personalities—forgot that a “production company” isn’t a real company (and shouldn’t be) and that the card at the end of the final credits is a vanity card. Many usually hard-nosed investors made a classic rube’s mistake. They mistook the set dressing for the real thing. For the past five months, they’ve had time to total up their mistakes. Look for the end of the expensive, money-losing, celebrity-driven production company, and look for the resurgence of the other kind, the fake kind. (My kind, in other words.)

I’m glad that I didn’t let Terry and his workers take out of my garage the stack of framed prints of our old vanity card.

When they were done carting the rest of my stuff, I gave him his money and he gave me a few of his business cards to hand out to my friends. The card said Trash Hauling, Junk and Toxic Waste Removal and then beneath that: PRESENTED BY TERRY.

“Presented?” I asked.

“I like the sound of it. Gives it pizzazz.”

Which it does. My vanity card had two cigars in an ashtray. Terry’s vanity card has the word “presented” in an odd and hilarious context. In the wake of the 2023 strike, there’s going to be less of everything in show business. Except for vanity. And that, as we know, is the cheapest thing to satisfy. All you need is a card.
HOLLYWOOD COMMENTARY

The Vanity Card

ROB LONG

ONCE I HAD A LOT of stuff to get rid of, so I gathered it all in a big pile and called someone in the trash-hauling business to come and cart it away. That's the key detail: I called somebody who was specifically in the trash-hauling business.

So the next day an old rattling truck creaked up the alley, and a bunch of vaguely seedy characters hopped off and started piling my stuff into the back of the truck. The raggiest guy turned out to be the owner of the enterprise, a guy named Terry. He and I chatted briefly as he barked orders at his crew.

“What business are you in?” he asked, kicking though some of the piles of my throwaway possessions.

“I’m a writer,” I said. He nodded sagely.

“I’m an actor myself,” he said. “But I also produce.”

He was sifting through my stuff for items he wanted to save—but when he looked into the cracked mirror leaning against the rusty mountain bike in my garage, what he saw was: Terry, Actor-Producer. In Los Angeles, this isn’t unusual.

Everyone here knows that show business has its ups and downs. No one ever gets to the top in an unbroken series of sunny days. So my rule is this: If you say you’re an actor, fine: You’re an actor. If you say you’re a producer, I’m all in: You're a producer.

And also: Being a writer-producer has been my actual, contractual, widely accepted job title for nearly 33 years, and most days I don’t produce anything at all and the only thing I write is a to-do list. What’s worse, between 1993 and 2007, I would be described in professional biographies and bottom-of-the-article identifiers this way: Rob Long is a television writer and producer. His production company is based at Paramount Studios.

Production company! That conjures up an image of multiple assistants buzzing around, making clickety-clackety noises on the polished floor, running in and out of creative meetings and story conferences. Instead, we had an office and a bathroom and a surly assistant, and most afternoons we would stick damp towels under the doorjambs to keep our cigar smoke from wafting throughout the building, which would trigger a visit from Paramount Studios Security to remind us that smoking in the workplace is a violation of Section 5148 of the California Occupational Safety and Health law.

What made it a “production company” was two things. One, a piece of paper: It said so on the contract. And two, a title card at the end of every episode we produced with a company logo—two cigars in an ashtray, as it happened—and our names. The industry term for that item is vanity card, which perfectly describes its true purpose. It didn’t mean anything, but it sure made us feel important. (Additional benefit: It cost the studio nothing.)

That was, as I said, until 2007, which was the beginning of a strike of the Writers Guild of America against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers. When that strike ended in 2008, money was tight, and there was a big reduction in the number of production deals. All that was left for a lot of us after that major contraction was the vanity card.

Now that the 2023 Writers Guild strike is over and show business is

continued on page 55
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 a Brandeis Center study. 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. The 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’ 3,000-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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