After Hamas is destroyed, here are the five things that must not happen in Gaza

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

Join the effort at afmda.org/give or call 866.632.2763.
I was grateful to be honored—or, perhaps I should say, targeted—at the 2023 Commentary roast, the magazine’s 13th such annual event. John Podhoretz said he wanted to recognize me partly for my work as a senator, but mostly for my standing as a 28-year subscriber to Commentary. What follows here is an edited version of the words I said after being roasted by John and others.

Commentary is a truly vital institution, a lode-star of conservative, Jewish, and American intellectual life. Though, I have to confess, standards seem to have declined under new management. Norman Podhoretz helped launch the careers of Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Jeane Kirkpatrick; John helped launch the careers of Jennifer Rubin and Max Boot.

Maybe John rebelled against his dad. But I thought you’re supposed to start out as a liberal at Commentary and turn into a conservative—not start as a conservative and become a Trump-deranged liberal at the Washington Post.

Notwithstanding his son’s shortcomings, Norman Podhoretz is a giant of both the conservative and the Jewish worlds. So much of what I know comes from reading Norman over the years. He’s the living soul of Commentary. We should all hope to emulate his “love affair with America” and to instill it in our kids and grandkids.

To be clear, though, I’m not a “neoconservative.” I was, to borrow a phrase, “right from the beginning.” I didn’t grow up in a political family, but we were patriotic, traditional, and conservative with a small “c.” It wasn’t what you’d call a philosophical conservatism. But as a college freshman, I noticed a plain, no-frills magazine in a friend’s dorm room. I picked it up because I recognized a few names: Norman Podhoretz, Elliott Abrams, William J. Bennett, Irving Kristol, Harvey Mansfield, Charles Murray, James Q. Wilson. That magazine was the November 1995 Commentary, the 50th-anniversary issue. I haven’t put it down since.

I became a loyal subscriber. I also located back issues in the library and discovered classics like Moynihan’s “The United States in Opposition,” Kirkpatrick’s “Dictatorships and Double Standards,” and Richard Pipes’s “Why the Soviet Union Thinks It Could Fight & Win a Nuclear War.” I probably learned more down in the basement library than I did in the classroom.

It wasn’t easy to be a subscriber back in those days. No PDFs or online versions for us. As a college kid, I had to call the Commentary office each summer to change my address. Each time, the same lady answered with the gravelly tone of someone just back from a long smoke break. One time, I asked her, “I bet you don’t have many subscribers in the 72834 zip code, do you?” After a long, impatient sigh, she said, “Hon, we don’t have many subscribers in Arkansas.”

It’s true, I wasn’t immersed in the Jewish tradition as a boy. The nearest synagogue was more than an hour away. My little town did have three Baptist churches, two Methodist churches, and one Presbyterian church for mixed marriages of Baptists and Methodists.

When I got a list of my freshman roommates and one was named Cohen from New York, my dad sincerely wondered, “I served in Vietnam with a guy
named Cohen from New York, maybe they're related.” I replied, in earnest, “I’ll ask him when we talk.”

Fair to say, I wasn’t well informed about Judaism or Israel. Until I started reading Joseph Epstein’s short stories in Commentary, I didn’t even realize I was a goy. But I always felt a kind of intuitive kinship with the Jewish people. Despite my Christian faith, by temperament, I confess, I’ve always been more of an Old Testament kind of guy.

Thanks to Commentary, I played catch-up quickly. I probably knew Oslo was a dangerous folly before I really knew what Oslo was. When the peace processors pressed their case at Camp David, Commentary delivered a reliably scathing critique.

By the second intifada and then the 9/11 attacks, I hardly had to wait for the next issue of Commentary to be equipped to argue against the campus radicals and terror apologists. Still, in arguing what Norman called World War IV, I relied on him to quickly arm me with new facts and arguments.

My mom cleaned out her attic recently. She discovered several boxes labeled “Commentary 1995 to 2004” with dog-eared and annotated pages. The next year I joined the Army, which ended my archiving habit. But she forwarded my issues wherever I was around the world, just like Joseph Epstein’s mother did for him when he served in the Army—as he reminisced on the occasion of Commentary’s 75th anniversary.

Each issue offered indispensable wisdom, insight, and humor—and not just about Jewish life in America or Israel and the Middle East. Commentary exposed the moral scandal of affirmative action. Commentary warned about the hollowing out of our military. Commentary always saw Communist China as a present and gathering danger.

I still depend on Commentary. As a father of two young sons, I’ve returned more than once to Midge Decter’s essay “What Are Little Boys Made Of?” When my aides need guidance on some foreign-policy controversy, I sometimes tell them, “Go look in the Commentary archives, you’ll find something there.” Commentary is more essential than ever. In fact, I suggest repurposing Richard Nixon’s old campaign slogan for marketing purposes: Commentary, now more than ever.

After the atrocities of October 7, now more than ever, we need a strong, confident, and unequivocal defense of the West, especially the United States and Israel. Our nations are good; our enemies are evil.

Now more than ever, we need to reclaim our political, cultural, and social institutions from what Norman has long called “jackal bins,” radicals so ignorant of history that they don’t see their roots in the French Revolution, but no less dangerous for it. (He adopted it after
reading an interview by Jimmy Breslin of an LBJ administration pooh-bah who was clearly referring to the “Jacobins,” only Breslin didn’t know what a Jacobin was.)

Now more than ever, we need to stand up for those whom George Washington called “the children of the stock of Abraham” and fight back against the hatred of anti-Semitism.

This has been Commentary’s mission from the beginning. After the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust and a revolting new outburst of anti-Semitism on our campuses and in our streets, we need Commentary now more than ever.

I don’t belong to the “stock of Abraham.” I therefore don’t worry that a lunatic might blow up my family’s house of worship. I don’t fear that a madman will try to run over kids at my sons’ school. I understand that I can’t fully know how many Jews feel and what they fear in these moments.

But after three decades of reading Commentary, there are a few things I do know.

Israel’s war against Hamas is righteous and just—and it will be won.

Israel doesn’t need patronizing lectures about civilian casualties. As far as I’m concerned, Israel can bounce the rubble in Gaza.

Israel has no more obligation to provide aid to Gaza than we had to provide aid to Germany and Japan in World War II.

Israel’s ultimate enemy here—and ours—is Iran, and neither Israel nor the United States can be completely safe until the ayatollahs are scared straight or killed dead.

The children of the stock of Abraham are indeed God’s chosen people, so anti-Semites are at war with the Almighty, not a good place to be.

America cannot tolerate these anti-Semites. They should suffer severe legal, social, and political consequences for their hate.

There’s a famous line in one of Commentary’s most famous articles, “Jewish Faith and the Holocaust,” by Emil Fackenheim. This line was actually written by Norman, who edited the article. He wrote of “an absolute commandment: Jews are forbidden to grant posthumous victories to Hitler.”

I join Norman and all friends of Commentary in strict observance of this commandment. No victories for Hitler or Hitlerism. No victories for Hamas, or Hezbollah, or Iran. No victories for the jackal bins marching in our streets and on our campuses.

Victory in this struggle will be ours, and ours alone. And Commentary will be there to chronicle our victory, now more than ever.

God bless Commentary, and may God continue to bless and protect the Jewish people.
# Articles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Richard Goldberg</td>
<td>After Hamas Is Destroyed, Here Are the Five Things That Must Not Happen in Gaza</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathan Foreman</td>
<td>Hating Jews and Israel: The View from London</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilfred Reilly</td>
<td>What ‘Free Palestine' and ‘Black Lives Matter’ Have in Common</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Epstein</td>
<td>Brush Off Your Shakespeare</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How bad are things on Shakespeare's 'sceptered isle'? An oppressor–oppressed narrative is trapping the world in a state of false consciousness.

A dissent on the Bard.
### Politics & Ideas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrew Roberts</td>
<td>Not-So-Great Scott</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You don’t need to invent nonsense when you tell Napoleon’s story on screen.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tod Lindberg</td>
<td>Moyn v. World</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Liberalism Against Itself</em>, by Samuel Moyn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael A. Woronoff</td>
<td>Friedman’s Choice</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Death of Public School</em>, by Cara Fitzpatrick</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Wolpe</td>
<td>Liel Leibovitz’s Talmud</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>How the Talmud Can Change Your Life</em>, by Liel Leibovitz</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Monthly Commentaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Guest Commentary</td>
<td>Tom Cotton</td>
<td>Tom Cotton</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Now More than Ever</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reader Commentary</td>
<td>Letters</td>
<td>Letters</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>on the November issue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tech Commentary</td>
<td>James B. Meigs</td>
<td>James B. Meigs</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Future Isn’t Going as Promised</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington Commentary</td>
<td>Matthew Continetti</td>
<td>Matthew Continetti</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Putin Won’t Stop</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Commentary</td>
<td>Christine Rosen</td>
<td>Christine Rosen</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Showstopping of Mehdi Hasan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jewish Commentary</td>
<td>Meir Y. Soloveichik</td>
<td>Meir Y. Soloveichik</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The Jewish Story Is the American Story</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hollywood Commentary</td>
<td>Rob Long</td>
<td>Rob Long</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>One Fray at a Time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To the Editor:

THANK YOU to John Podhoretz for describing the reality of Alon’s life in Israel (“The Story of an Israeli at War,” November). The only thing missing is hearing from Alon himself. His thoughts, his words, his hopes for his future, and his reasons for staying in Israel with his children and raising his family under G-d’s protection and divine love.

I will pray for Alon, his family, all Jews, and all residents of Israel. I cannot even begin to understand what it must be like to experience the kind of savagery against innocent Jewish people that I have seen documented recently. Alon and his people are enduring unspeakable, heinous cruelty by an evil enemy devoid of all human compassion.

ANTHONY N.
Taichung City, Taiwan

To the Editor:

JOHN PODHORETZ’S article brought me to tears. By describing the trajectory of his nephew’s life, he illustrates what it’s been like to grow up in Israel over the past 30-plus years. I knew about all these regional events, but it makes such a difference when their effects are personalized and brought down to the scale of one life. Alon is a true Jewish hero. Thank you for sharing his story with us.

ESTRA GRANT
Beachwood, Ohio

To the Editor:

REGARDING John Podhoretz’s mention of Amalek, many Jews had come to interpret that story as a metaphor for our internal evil inclinations and the need for us to confront ourselves (“In Every Gener-

Amalek

January 2024
To the Editor:

In his essay “Getting Reading Right,” Robert Pondiscio offers a scathing but confused critique of the “balanced literacy” approach of Columbia University professor Lucy Calkins (November). He notes that only 20 percent of his students were reading on grade level, implying that this was at least partially the result of Calkins’s methods. Pondiscio also applauds New York City’s decision to switch to reading programs that are “phonics-heavy.” These two points are worth examining.

As I understand it, “balanced literacy” refers to curricula or teaching approaches that balance phonics and phonological-awareness instruction (i.e., decoding, sound-
New York City students need more
cclusively or even primarily phonics.
nals, but not ex-
hool district. Some are “ad hoc and improvisational,” as Pondiscio
describes Calkins’s program. Some
are more structured, such as those
based on commercial textbooks and
workbooks. Critics of “bal-
anced literacy” usually claim that it
doesn’t include enough systematic
instruction in phonics, but that can
vary widely from one balanced-
literacy program to another.

As Pondiscio writes, the concept
of balanced-literacy instruction was
a response to the reading wars of
the 1950s and 1960s between
reading educators who wanted to
emphasize phonics and those who
wanted to emphasize whole-word
recognition, comprehension, mo-
tivation, and interest—the “whole
language” approach. Balanced lit-
eracy was developed to find middle
ground by emphasizing multiple
components of reading, including
phonics. Pondiscio quotes Tim Sha-
nahan, a member of the 2000 Na-
tional Reading Panel, as saying,
“Kids need decoding. Kids need
reading comprehension strategies.
Kids need fluency. And putting time
into those things is really critical.”

But Pondiscio incorrectly interprets
Shanahan’s comment to mean, “The
reading wars were over. Phonics
won.” This is exactly what Shan-
nahan did not say. He was saying that
students needed multiple reading
skills, including phonics, but not ex-
clusively or even primarily phonics.

While Pondiscio suggests that
New York City students need more
systematic instruction in phonics, he
acknowledges that

the soul of reading is not decod-
ing but reading comprehen-
sion—the ability to take mean-
ing 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.”

If all of his students had mas-
tered decoding such that inade-
quate phonics skills were not their
reading deficiency, why would his
school need a new “phonics-heavy”
reading program? It sounds like
the school was already doing an
adequate job teaching phonics and
decoding, either because of or de-
spite Calkins’s program.

Pondiscio is correct that schools
need to teach science, art, mu-
ic, social studies, and math so
students can acquire the back-
ground knowledge and vocabulary
required for comprehension. But
that doesn’t mean they necessarily
need more phonics and decoding
instruction. It could mean that they
need exactly what they are getting
now, or even less.

Emily Dexter
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Robert Pondiscio writes:
I’TS IRONIC that an essay about
reading comprehension should
itself become an exercise in exactly
that literacy skill. Emily Dexter
writes that as she understands it,
“balanced literacy” (as the name
implies) is supposed to balance
phonics with “instruction in the
other components of reading, such
as fluency, vocabulary, and compre-
hension.” To this I can only say, well,
yes, that is correct. But as I thought
I’d made clear, explicit instruction
in anything was frowned upon in
my South Bronx elementary school
in favor of what one critic described
as “vibes-based literacy”—a phrase
that captures so perfectly the meth-
od I was expected to use to bring
struggling readers closer to profi-
ciency. The idea seemed to be that
if we cultivated a love of books and
stories, children would naturally
become good readers.

Emily Dexter also notes that my
students’ struggles had nothing to
do with phonics. Right again. She
wonders why I think New York City
students “need more systematic
instruction in phonics.” Here she
has failed to find the main idea. Re-
placing vibes-based literacy with a
“phonics-heavy curriculum” is just
a case of addition by subtraction:
less class time spent on ineffec-
tive nonsense. But I’d hoped I was
sufficiently clear that there is far
more to mature reading compre-
hension than just “decoding” text.
Our long-running “reading wars”
pitting phonics vs. whole language
are themselves a “gross oversimpli-
fication” and a false dichotomy that
risks leaving unaddressed the root
condition that drives poor read-
ing comprehension: inattention
to building students’ background
knowledge and vocabulary via rich
curriculum in history, science, and
the arts—all of which have tended
to be sacrificed in recent decades
to make more time for fashionable
and ineffective reading instruction.
Phonics is just the starting line.
The heavier lift is everything else.

Letters : January 2024
Russophobia

To the Editor:

GREATLY enjoyed reading Gary Saul Morson’s essay, but I’m surprised he did not mention one thing I find quite revealing (“What Is ‘Russophobia’?” November). The writer who popularized the term Russophobia, Igor Shafarevich, was famously cited by another far more celebrated Russian author, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

Solzhenitsyn, in his 1978 Harvard commencement address, called Shafarevich’s book on socialism “a penetrating historical analysis demonstrating that socialism of any type and shade leads to a total destruction of the human spirit and to a leveling of mankind into death.”

I gather Shafarevich shared Solzhenitsyn’s courageous dissent against Soviet brutality, and in fact Shafarevich lost his university post for protesting in Andrei Sakharov’s defense. This makes both authors genuine heroes, while at the same time both were most likely sympathetic to the Russian anti-Western chauvinism that Morson explores in this piece.

Peter Blau
Belmont, North Carolina

Gary Saul Morson writes:

I THANK PETER Blau for pointing out that Shafarevich, a well-known mathematician, also wrote an influential book on socialism. Solzhenitsyn admired Shafarevich’s work as a dissident, but I see no evidence that Solzhenitsyn shared his anti-Semitic views. Solzhenitsyn was a patriot, but to call him a chauvinist suggests that, for example, he supported Russian imperialism, when the exact opposite was the case. He thought Russia should give up its ambition to be a “great power” and look inward to reform the terrible deformations of soul and character occasioned by the Soviet experience.

Shafarevich is a good example of why being opposed to Soviet cruelty does not mean one cannot hold cruel opinions. The enemy of my enemy is not necessarily my friend.

Peter Blau
Belmont, North Carolina

Bookshopping

To the Editor:

AS A longtime bookshop haunt-er, I deeply appreciated Joseph Epstein’s great essay (“The Old Curiosity Bookshop,” November). If he hasn’t read it, he should check out George Orwell’s essay “Bookshop Memories,” first published in November 1936 and now included in various anthologies of his essays. In it, Orwell remembers his time as a bookshop employee in England in the early 1930s, a bookshop being “a kind of paradise where charming old gentlemen browse eternally among calf-bound folios.”

Richard Zuelch
Lakewood, California

To the Editor:

Joseph Epstein writes, “A poem in pixels doesn’t seem like a poem at all.” Maybe not, but that sentence does. Epstein alone is worth the price of a subscription to Commentary.

Ehud Neor
Nitzan, Israel

Commentary
IN HIS NEW BOOK, The Conservative Futurist: How to Create the Sci-Fi World We Were Promised, American Enterprise Institute scholar James Pethokoukis writes about the go-go years of the 1960s: Saturn V rockets were blasting to the moon, atomic power promised to make electricity “too cheap to meter,” and sci-fi TV shows like Star Trek depicted new marvels right around the corner.

Our high-tech future isn’t turning out quite like we expected. It began to go sideways in the 1970s. The “Space Age was suddenly grounded,” Pethokoukis writes, and “the Atomic Age began powering down.” What happened to that boundless 1960s optimism? To be sure, there are aspects of our lives that seem almost science-fictional. Our phones really are miniature miracles, and through them, as we walk down the street, we can access the sum of human knowledge in seconds. But we don’t have Pan Am flights to the moon, as 2001: A Space Odyssey predicted, or underwater hotels like the ones depicted in GM’s Futurama exhibit at the 1964 World’s Fair. Our biggest technological advances have been mostly in the soft-touch virtual, rather than the gritty physical, world.

It’s hard to believe it was over a decade ago that the tech savant Peter Thiel made his famous quip, “We wanted flying cars, instead we got 140 characters.” The comment was meant as a dig at the triviality of Twitter, which was then limited to just a couple of dozen words per tweet. (How far we’ve come!) Of course, slagging social media was a little rich coming from Thiel, one of the earliest—and most richly rewarded—investors in Facebook. But he was serious. “We no longer live in a technologically accelerating world,” Thiel told a group of (presumably bummed out) Yale students in 2013. Was he right? As Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai said to Henry Kissinger about the impact of the French Revolution: “It’s too soon to tell.”

Since Thiel made his backhanded pronouncement, we’ve had some major technological breakthroughs: Among other futuristic wonders, self-driving cars and artificial intelligence seem to be on the brink of common use. But are they? It turns out that the road to the seamless high-tech future is bumpier than most of us imagined. Many of the technologies that were supposed to change the world are going through a rough spot at the moment.

Perhaps more worrisome are the everyday digital technologies that should have had the bugs worked out by now, things like shopping on Amazon, searching for information on Google, or using social-media sites. Have you noticed that those ubiquitous digital tools have slowly gotten crappier? Maybe Thiel wasn’t
Commentary

pessimistic enough. For not only have our flying cars been indefinitely delayed, even our humble digital apps are failing to live up to expectations.

The gap between expectation and reality is especially obvious when it comes to autonomous vehicles (AVs). In 2016, Ford’s then-CEO Mark Fields promised that within five years the company would be selling an AV so advanced that it wouldn’t even need a steering wheel. That same year, the president of the ride-sharing service Lyft predicted that by 2021, “a fully autonomous fleet of cars will provide the majority of Lyft rides.” Tesla has been charging a premium for “Full Self Driving” capability for years. But users report that the system remains prone to glitches—including phantom braking and phantom swerving—and requires diligent oversight from the human driver.

But that hasn’t stopped carmakers and tech companies from conducting uncontrollable autonomous-driving experiments on our public streets. Several states have allowed limited testing of AVs for years, usually with a “safety driver” behind the wheel, just in case. But in August 2023, California regulators decided to make San Francisco the test city for fleet-range, unsupervised robotaxis. Waymo, a subsidiary of Google parent Alphabet, and General Motor’s AV venture, Cruise, both got permission to operate at will. The experiment has not gone well. Within a week, a Cruise AV collided with a fire truck. Social media filled up with clips of AVs blowing through crowded crosswalks, freezing up in traffic, and driving into wet cement.

Writer Theodore Gioia spent several weeks riding in San Francisco’s autonomous ride-share vehicles for the urban news site Curbed. It was a nerve-wracking experience. “With outrageous delicacy, my robotaxis drove through the streets like we were navigating an active minefield, turning at a glacial pace and cautiously inching over each speed bump,” he writes. The cars took weird, circuitous routes, wouldn’t pick him up or drop him off where he wanted, and often had “seizures,” stopping unexpectedly with the steering wheel twitching nervously.

San Francisco’s AV experiment went from worrisome to horrifying on October 2, 2023, when a pedestrian was hit by a human driver on Market Street. The crash threw the woman into the path of a Cruise vehicle, which stopped with her leg pinned under its rear tire. Instead of just waiting for first responders to show up, the car then initiated a programmed safety maneuver: Seeking a “minimal-risk condition,” it pulled over to the curb, dragging the poor woman 20 feet across the pavement. This is the kind of incident you can’t easily train an AV to cope with, a one-in-a-million event. And attempts to anticipate how a car should respond to emergency situations might have made things worse. As Gioia writes, “this catastrophe resulted, in part, from a safety protocol.” It turns out that operating big heavy machines in the unpredictable physical world is a lot tougher than the digital hotshots expected.

California’s Department of Motor Vehicles soon suspended Cruise’s permits to operate on public streets, citing “an unreasonable risk to public safety.” With that, the company began to implode. Both founders quit. GM announced it was recalling all 950 Cruise vehicles deployed so far. And GM CEO Mary Barra told shareholders the company would be slashing the division’s budgets. As I said in a column two years ago (“Tapping the Brakes on Self-Driving Cars,” December 2021), the AV revolution will arrive eventually, but it faces a longer, bumpier road than tech boosters imagined.

In his nail-biting rides around San Francisco, Gioia noticed something interesting. Compared with riding in an Uber or taxi cab, travelling via an AV ride-share service is a big hassle. The passenger “must make sacrifices for the car’s convenience,” he writes. “Thus Waymo and Cruise flip the typical customer-comes-first capitalist logic.” Gioia has hit on one of the core features of modern digital businesses: They aren’t really built to prioritize the needs of their users. The companies pouring billions into self-driving cars aren’t responding to an overwhelming consumer demand. Few people say they want to own such a vehicle; many tell pollsters they’re afraid even to ride in one. Instead, these corporations are serving their own priorities. Big Tech wants access to the data we’ll generate as we travel around in these always-connected boxes. And the carmakers want to get into the ride-share business. Rather than simply selling us cars as a one-time transaction, they want to be paid for the time we spend in cars owned by them or their ride-share partners. In other words, they want to turn car transportation into a service.

There’s a certain arrogance to this plan. In order to convert automotive transportation into a digital product, large tech and auto companies need lots of people to ride in their robotaxis. But right now, those riders aren’t customers in the traditional sense. Sure, they pay money for the privilege of a herky-jerky ride across town. But their real value to Cruise or Waymo is in the data they provide that will help the companies refine their own services. Even people who don’t ride in the vehicles are providing value. As an AV makes its way through the city, the behavior of every pedestrian, cyclist, or car it encounters becomes part of the company’s vast database modeling how the AV should navigate around these unpredictable variables. That
woman who got run over by the Cruise robotaxi? Another data point.

During the early smartphone era, tech insiders often repeated some version of the meme “If you’re not paying for the product, you are the product.” That was certainly true for services such as Facebook and Google. Their business model is to monetize their users—us—by collecting every scrap of data they can on our interests and then helping advertisers follow us wherever we go. For a long time that trade-off worked well for users. Google’s search function gave us access to a world of information and social-media apps seamlessly connected us to friends, family, and news. But lately, that deal has been breaking down. It’s becoming more obvious that the digital giants don’t care about us and, in many cases, don’t really trust us. The quality of their services is crumbling.

For example, a few weeks ago, Google Maps sent dozens of cars on a detour around a backup on I-15 heading out of Las Vegas. The detour was a jeep trail that ran straight into the desert for miles before vanishing in the sage brush. Some cars had to be towed out. “Nobody was turning around, so we figured that it led somewhere,” one driver said. This is not the future we were promised.

The tech theorist Cory Doctorow calls this downward cycle “enshittification” (par-don the scatology). He summarizes it like this: “Here is how platforms die: First, they are good to their users; then they abuse their users to make things better for their business customers; finally, they abuse those business customers to claw back all the value for themselves. Then, they die.”

Platforms like Facebook, Google, and Amazon follow a predictable life cycle, Doctorow explains. At first, they offer customers excellent services as they try to lock up users and lock out competitors. Google provided an uncluttered interface with the world’s best search algorithm; Amazon surfaced the best-reviewed products and offered the cheapest shipping, and so on. “Once those users are firmly in hand,” Doctorow writes, “the platforms degrade what made users choose the platform in the first place, making the deal worse for them in order to attract business customers.” Google’s search became cluttered with ads, and, worse, the company began to allow advertisers to game the search results. Amazon began to favor advertisers in rankings and tolerated rampant abuse of its product-review process.

In the final stage of this process, the big platforms start to squeeze their business partners. And antitrust suit charged Google and Facebook with secretly colluding on an advertising bidding platform rigged to keep their own ad rates up and potential competitors out. Regulators have accused Amazon of using its internal data to help Chinese manufacturers create cheap knockoffs of top-selling products on the platform (while giving Amazon an oversized cut, of course). The innovative companies that created those products in the first place got shafted. And so did Amazon’s customers—I mean users, buyers, chumps?—who wound up with inferior versions of the products they’d been looking for.

The Wall Street Journal reports that customer satisfaction with Amazon is slipping. Searching for products on the site used to be fun. Now, with hundreds of no-name, look-alike items jamming the pages, it’s a chore. As tech writer John Herman notes, “the interface itself is full of junk.” Amazon is no longer treating us like customers; it’s not putting our needs first. We’ve become a product to be monetized.

Normally, I see myself as a techno-optimist. I know that, even with all these annoying trends, the digital revolution has unquestionably made our lives better. And we don’t have to accept the endless degradation of our digital tools. We can—and should—walk away from platforms that don’t serve our interests. (I’ve abandoned Google search for DuckDuckGo, for example.) But it is important to recognize that technological progress isn’t always easy, and it doesn’t always move in a straight line. And sometimes, progress seems slow until it suddenly moves very fast.

Today, we are in the early stages of what will likely be one of history’s biggest technological revolutions, the age of artificial intelligence. Some experts, including pioneers in the field, worry that AI could evolve into a world-destroying technology. Others, including futurist Pethokoukis, think those worries are overblown and believe that AI will boost global living standards dramatically. No doubt, the opportunities and challenges of AI will be the subject of many future Tech Commentary columns. (I just hope AI doesn’t write them for me.) But here’s one pitfall we should watch for. AI systems will feed on and learn from everything humans do and produce. There will be many situations in which—like those riders in San Francisco’s Cruise and Waymo vehicles—we think we are customers being served by a new technology when in fact we are serving its needs. We will need to make sure that we stay in the driver’s seat.

It’s becoming more obvious that the digital giants don’t care about us and, in many cases, don’t really trust us. The quality of their services is crumbling.
The debate over American military assistance to Ukraine has lost touch with reality. The argument in Washington is less about Ukraine’s defense and America’s place in the world than about domestic politics ahead of the 2024 presidential election. The Ukrainian people have been drafted into America’s culture war, with potentially terrible consequences for both nations and the world.

At the time of writing, Senate Republicans won’t approve additional weapons transfers until the Biden administration takes action to close the southern border to illegal migration and drug trafficking. House Republicans might not vote for another aid package under any circumstances. The issue divides the GOP. House Speaker Mike Johnson and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell support additional arms for Ukraine, but former president (and current front-runner) Donald Trump is ambivalent, at best. Trump calls the shots in the Republican Party.

There is a chance that, by the time you read these words, Congress will have come together to pass President Biden’s $105 billion request for aid to Israel, Ukraine, Taiwan, and the southern border. Or perhaps the Biden administration will have discovered that, thanks to an accounting error, there is enough money to help the Ukrainians pin down and degrade the Russian military for another year. Perhaps not. America’s support for Ukraine may be coming to an end.

No one should have any illusions about what will happen next. A lapse in aid would be a coup for Russian propaganda. Vladimir Putin would pocket another chess piece and scan the board for targets. America’s partners would recognize the arrival of the post-American world. China’s Xi Jinping, Iran’s Ali Khamenei, North Korea’s Kim Jong Un, Venezuela’s Nicolas Maduro, and countless other murderers, thugs, and genocidaires would be emboldened. Cutting off aid to Ukraine will not reduce violence or lessen the threat to America. It will amplify the carnage. It will enhance the risk.

Some people argue that stopping the flow of U.S. weapons to Ukraine will force President Volodymyr Zelensky to sue for peace. Maybe—though Ukrainians seem as willing as ever to defend their homeland. Let’s say that a broke and empty-handed Zelensky does call for a cease-fire and negotiations. Would Putin lay down his arms? There is no reason to think so. And yet, out of ignorance, indifference, or malice, a great number of Americans seem to believe that our assistance to Ukraine is what fuels this conflict. They seem to believe that Putin would like nothing more than for the war in Ukraine to end. He does not. On the contrary: The Russian dictator gives every indication that he is mobilizing for years of aggression against not only Ukraine but also America and the West.

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Commentary
Shortly after the Black Sabbath of October 7, Russian officials welcomed Hamas leaders to Moscow. The Russian government’s latest budget, authorized in November, devotes 30 percent of spending to the military. (Defense accounts for about 12 percent of the U.S. federal budget.) As part of this buildup, Putin will add 170,000 soldiers, bringing the total size of his armed forces to 2.2 million personnel. Also in November, Russia tested a submarine-launch intercontinental ballistic missile. Putin has strengthened his alliances with China, Iran, and North Korea. In early December, he traveled to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, flexing his muscles as leader of the anti-American axis of resistance.

The Kremlin has identified and exploited loopholes in the sanctions levied against Russia. The durable Russian economy, flush with petrodollars, sustains Putin’s wars as well as Russian proxies in the Middle East and Africa. If Putin no longer feels the bite of the Ukrainian army, he will be free to maneuver. He will probe for weaknesses in his near-abroad and redeploy forces from Ukraine to build situations of strength elsewhere. Though the Russians may not be able to take Kiev, they certainly will gain territory if Ukraine lacks American aid. Putin may “freeze” the conflict in Ukraine and pursue his interests in the Caucasus and in Central Asia, while saber-rattling against NATO.

Taking a cue from his frenemy Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey, Putin has seized the migrant weapon. Russia is helping illegal migrants from the Middle East and Africa enter the Baltic nations, pressuring democratic governments and generous social-welfare states. Finland has sealed its border with Russia to stop the traffic. Latvia and Lithuania are considering similar moves. Russia is fomenting unrest in Moldova and in Bosnia, as well. According to Jacek Siewiera, the head of Poland’s National Security Bureau, Eastern Europe must act quickly. “If we want to avoid war,” he said on December 4, “the NATO countries on the eastern flank should adopt a shorter, three-year time horizon to prepare for confrontation.”

It did not have to be this way. Ever since February 2022, when he failed to deter Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, President Biden has played odd games with military aid. Rather than ask for one massive supplemental bill early in the conflict, when America was united in support for Ukraine and for President Zelensky, Biden instead asked Congress to approve several tranches of support. Each weapons package has been more controversial than the last.

Rather than supply the Ukrainians with everything they ask for, and as quickly as possible, Biden has sent over the most advanced weapons platforms reluctantly, in dribs and drabs, while withholding airplanes, armor, and long-range artillery that could give Ukraine an advantage. As the war went on, nationalist populists gained ground within the GOP, demonizing Zelensky, echoing Russian propaganda, and undermining the bipartisan consensus in favor of Ukraine. Biden may say that America will back Ukraine for as long as it takes, but he missed his chance to provide Ukraine with whatever it might have taken to roll back Putin’s armies. The result is a brutal war of position in Europe, a political stalemate in the United States, and an empowered Russia.

Not long ago, on a visit to Washington, a Ukrainian parliamentarian (and member of the opposition) delivered a grim assessment of the battlefield. He observed that this year’s Ukrainian counteroffensive culminated in limited gains, and that Russia is now on offense. He acknowledged the widening divisions in Ukraine, between Zelensky and political rivals and between Zelensky and parts of the military. He expressed concern that Ukrainian morale might waver if the United States cuts off aid. Yet he remained hopeful that America will continue to support his resilient country.

I asked him why. The parliamentarian replied that few members of Congress oppose weapons transfers to Ukraine in principle. Most critics take aim instead at the economic assistance we give to the Ukrainian government and civil society. What’s more, he said, the United States does not have a choice in the matter. The strategic price of leaving Ukraine to fend for itself is too high. America can’t afford it.

Abandoning Ukraine to the Russian bear would be a catastrophe of greater magnitude than the retreat from Afghanistan in 2021. The Afghan rout damaged America’s credibility. Defeat in Ukraine would shake the foundations of the transatlantic alliance and NATO and green-light a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Incompetence in Afghanistan pulled Biden’s approval ratings underwater. Losing two wars in one term would doom his reelection. The Taliban, for the moment, seem to be limiting their malign behavior to the Afghan people and to Pakistan. Vladimir Putin’s ambitions—and those of his Chinese patron—are global.

Opponents of aid to Ukraine evade the reality of Putin’s intent. For more than a decade—first in the republic of Georgia, then in Crimea and the Donbas, in Syria, and in the rest of Ukraine—Putin has sought to resurrect the Soviet Empire. He pursued his objective unencumbered until he met resistance in the battle for Kiev. If America abandons the fight for freedom in Ukraine, Putin won’t change. He won’t falter. He won’t stop. And the danger in which we will soon find ourselves will be matched only by our dishonor.
INCE 2020, Mehdi Hasan has received praise for being one of television's most prominent Muslim journalists. He enjoyed a comfortable perch at MSNBC, where he hosted an eponymous weekend show that was catnip to people on the very online left. In early 2023, he published a book, *Win Every Argument*, that traded on his pugnacious on-air style to offer readers helpful nuggets of advice such as “The key benefit of knowing your audience is that it grants you the ability to modify the language you use to make your case.”

It turns out there was one argument he couldn’t win, and an audience he clearly did not get to know quite well enough: his MSNBC viewers, who consistently registered their lack of interest in his show with abysmal ratings. As the *Washington Post* reported, Hasan’s show “regularly came in third place among the 25-to-54 demographic most valued by advertisers and averaged just 532,000 total viewers in October.”

Those ratings got even worse after the horrific October 7 attack on Israel by Hamas. As the *New York Post* reported, total viewers for MSNBC declined “24% for the four days between Oct. 7 and 10, compared to the same period the previous week,” while viewership rose steeply for FOX News and somewhat for CNN during the same period. This is perhaps because MSNBC hosts like Hasan refused to refer to Hamas killers as terrorists, preferring to call them “fighters” instead. They uncritically reported the Gaza Health Ministry’s false, inflated death tolls for Palestinians. And, in Hasan’s case, they frequently blamed Israel and its policies for the horrific attack on Israeli civilians—even going so far as to compare Israel’s response to Hamas to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. These are all extremist views not shared by the vast majority of Americans.

According to Nielsen, by early November, Hasan’s show had only 37,000 viewers in the 25–54 demographic, and only 411,000 total. At the end of the month, MSNBC announced that it was canceling the show, citing a redesign of its weekend lineup; Hasan would continue at the network as an on-air analyst and occasional guest host of other shows.

Such cancellations happen all the time; cable news is a graveyard of badly performing shows whose hosts failed to right the ratings ship (even Laura Ingraham had a short-lived MSNBC show called *Watch It!* in the 1990s). The *Washington Post* claimed the cancellation prompted a “blizzard of backlash,” but this is an overstatement. What it produced was an entirely predictable response from the usual suspects in politics and mainstream media who insist that Hasan was fired because he was a Muslim speaking truth to power.

Representative Ilhan Omar, a member of the left-wing “Squad” notable for her frequent expressions of anti-Semitism (and a regular guest of Hasan’s), was crestfallen. Hasan is “one of the most brilliant and most prominent Muslim journalists in the U.S.,” she posted on X. “It is deeply troubling that MSNBC is canceling his show amid a rampant rise of anti-Muslim bigotry and suppression of Muslim voices.” Omar is, as usual, lying: It is anti-Semitism, not anti-Muslim bigotry, that is disturbingly rampant at the moment.

**The Showstopping of Mehdi Hasan**

CHRISTINE ROSEN

Commentary

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15
No matter. She had plenty of help attempting to make Hasan into a symbol of Islamophobia. Hasan’s program “has felt like an oasis on air and more needed than ever,” Noura Erakat, a Palestinian-American activist, posted on X. “He should be amplified, not shut down.” For those unfamiliar with Erakat’s views, in 2022, as part of a program sponsored by anti-Israel group Non-Violence International, she said, “Palestinians will not attack Jews because they are Jewish” but “because they are their military occupiers and oppressors.” On another panel at the University of Illinois, she said, “Zionism is a bedfellow of Nazism and Anti-Semitism.”

Likewise, a representative of IfNotNow—whose main congressional supporter is Squad member Representative Rashida Tlaib, recently censured by the House for her anti-Semitism—called Hasan “a vital voice holding those in power to account, providing a space for those questioning unconditional U.S. support for Israel” and saw the cancellation “as part of the sharp rise in anti-Muslim rhetoric and hate.” Kenneth Roth, former head of the moral rot that is the NGO Human Rights Watch, said the show’s cancellation was “outrageous” and suggested that Hasan was fired for being “an outspoken critic of Israel’s conduct in Gaza.”

Several media outlets argued that, although Hasan’s ratings were consistently poor, MSNBC should have kept him on air. Why? Because they considered him an effective Internet troll on behalf of the left. “Although Hasan was not among MSNBC’s top-rated stars, his segments often went viral on social media, where users celebrated his takedowns of conservatives such as former Trump adviser John Bolton and Israeli government adviser Mark Regev,” the Washington Post noted. This, according to mainstream media’s most elite, is a good thing: “As Americans get more and more of their news from shared posts from news show segments, Hasan’s online amplification of his interviews put him on the cutting edge of the future of journalism.”

Others lamented Hasan as a silenced voice of the people who challenge the Democratic Party establishment. Writing in the Nation, John Nichols, who co-authored a book with multimillionaire socialist Senator Bernie Sanders titled It’s OK to Be Angry About Capitalism, clearly doesn’t understand that cable news is a business, not a nurturing nonprofit drum circle for talkers on the left. “We need more cable hosts who practice accountability journalism, in the way that Mehdi Hasan has so ably done,” Nichols wrote. Perry Bacon Jr. of the Washington Post lamented that the cancellation of Hasan’s show was evidence that even left-leaning MSNBC was becoming a tool of the Democratic Party “as opposed to a news outlet that upholds left-wing values.” He noted that MSNBC had given shows to several former Biden administration officials, including former press secretary Jen Psaki, who is described as taking “an increasingly prominent role” at the network.

How odd to read that by firing Hasan, MSNBC was losing a crucial, independent voice criticizing the administration. After all, in an interview earlier this year, the Guardian characterized Hasan as speaking about Joe Biden “with the zeal of a convert.” Hasan told the paper, “Joe Biden has done a lot, more than any president since LBJ, some might say since Roosevelt.” He added, “I never imagined I would say this—I was born in 1979—I think he’s the most impressive president of my lifetime.”

Hasan, who was born in the UK but became a U.S. citizen, cut his teeth at Al Jazeera and The Intercept—the first owned by the terror-sponsoring emirate of Qatar and the second a far-left website. He also expressed noxious views about non-Muslims and LGBTQ people. Resurfaced video from years ago shows a younger Hasan comparing non-Muslims to animals and homosexuality to pedophilia. These were beliefs he later claimed were merely bouts of “youthful enthusiasm” about which he says he professed his guilt several times in articles and Twitter threads over the years—which he then celebrated himself for announcing. As he told The Wrap, “rather than bury them, I chose to raise them myself in a Twitter thread over the weekend to try and urge us all to reckon with our prejudices and to challenge hate speech—whether witting or unwitting—wherever we find it.” He has also been credibly accused of plagiarism by journalist Lee Fang, also a veteran of the Intercept, who found that Hasan had copied entire paragraphs without attribution from a US News & World Report article about spankings.

Hubris is the Hasan brand. When he worked at Al Jazeera, he posted on Twitter a clip of himself interviewing a Trump campaign official with the observation: “Hey US media folks, here, I would argue immodestly, is how you interview a Trump supporter on Trump’s lies.” Perhaps he should have spent more time learning how to argue modestly, given the limits of his talents. He once told a reporter that he “used to worry” that MSNBC would find him “too edgy, too iconoclastic.” As it turns out, he was just too predictably partisan and uninteresting to his own viewers—and simply too appalling in the degree to which he crossed the line into anti-Semitism—even as he was clearly a hero to himself. As the New York Times noted in a review of his book: “Like Rambo, he says, he loves to lay a booby trap. ‘Boom!’ he writes, going on to describe how satisfying it is to watch the crestfallen look on his opponent’s face once the trap has been sprung” to provide that “showstopper moment.”

With the cancellation of his show, Hasan finally got the showstopper moment he truly deserved.
On November 14, Deborah Lipstadt spoke before the 290,000 assembled in support of Israel, and in opposition to Jew-hatred, on the Mall in Washington. In her remarks, the prominent historian of the Holocaust and now the U.S. special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism, made reference to a famous piece of correspondence between George Washington and early American Jewry:

Two hundred and thirty years ago, President George Washington reassured the Jews of Newport that our new nation would give bigotry no sanction and persecution no assistance; his meaning and his message were quite specific. In the United States of America, the bigotry of antisemitism must have no place, no quarter, no haven, no home. Anti-Semitism, or more explicitly, Jew-hatred—the world’s longest, oldest form of prejudice—has pierced and permeated too many countries, too many cultures, faith communities.

George Washington did indeed write these words, emphasizing that America would give “bigotry no sanction and persecution no assistance.” But this was not the first letter that he wrote to American Jews. What’s more, Washington was actually echoing a phrase fashioned by a prominent Jewish leader of the day. Altogether, the story behind Washington’s interaction with early American Jewry is extraordinary, and it is an essential story to tell in the very moment in which American Jewry finds itself.

Washington was sworn into office in New York in April of 1789. Immediately after, leaders from various minority faith communities in America—Baptist, Catholic, Quaker—each sent one letter of congratulations to the president. By contrast, American Jews—numbering perhaps 1,000 in total—sent him three letters and procrastinated in doing so, beginning only a year after his inauguration. This delay, and lack of unity, was a testament to the fact that American Jewry, then as now, had no one organization or position representing it, no chief rabbi or lay leader that spoke in its name. Washington was no doubt puzzled at the fact that Jewish leaders kept sending him letters. But in the end, we have reason to be grateful for Jewry’s failure to unify in this period, as Washington responded to each letter, and his first two responses stand as classics in American civic writing.

The first Jewish community to correspond with the president was that of Savannah; one Levi Sheftall wrote to Washington in June of 1790, glowingly reflecting how “your unexampled liberality and extensive philanthropy have dispelled that cloud of bigotry and superstition which has long, as a veil, shaded religion.” Washington responded in kind, exultantly writing, “I rejoice that a spirit of liberality and philanthropy is much more prevalent than it formerly was among the...
enlightened nations of the earth.” But then Washington went further, concluding with a scriptural reference, an exegetical interpretation, what Jews would call a deor Torah:

May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivering the Hebrews from their Egyptian Oppressors planted them in the promised land—whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation—still continue to water them with the dews of Heaven and to make the inhabitants of every denomination participate in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people whose God is Jehovah.

Here, Washington reveals that he was not merely responding to a letter; he was making American Jews feel as if they truly belonged. What he tells them is that he sees the tale of the Exodus and of America as parallel: The God Who performed miracles for Jews in the past is the same Deity who performed miracles for America in the present. The God Who saved Israel from tyranny saved America from tyranny as well. The Jews were to be welcomed in America not only because of the ideals of equality, but also because of the way in which the Jewish story inspired America itself.

It was only several months later, in August, that Washington visited Newport. There he was welcomed by Moses Seixas, the lay leader of its Jewish community. Seixas wrote to Washington words celebrating the new Constitution:

Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now (with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty disposer of all events) behold a Government, erected by the Majesty of the People—a Government, which to bigotry gives no sanction, to persecution no assistance—but generously affording to All liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship.

[Emphasis added.]

It was Seixas’s words that Washington deliberately echoed in response. “It is now no more that toleration is spoken of,” he wrote. Americans of all faiths ought to enjoy equality, and Washington explained why: “For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.”

The two letters need to be taken in tandem. Washington’s words to Newport’s Jews express the idea of American equality, but it is Washington’s letter to Savannah that reminds us how the Founders revered the Jewish story and sought succor from the Jewish faith. It explains why Jews were so warmly welcomed in America, as well as why so many Americans support Israel today. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reflected, the Founders’ reverence for the Hebrew Bible reflects the fact that “Israel, ancient and modern, and the United States are the two supreme examples of societies constructed in conscious pursuit of an idea.”

The story of Washington’s letters is instructive as American Jews confront the specter of anti-Israel Jew-hate in the United States. It is right to emphasize, as Lipstadt did, that bigotry toward any community in America is un-American, and to cite Washington in making that case. But it is also vital to stress what is also learned from the words that Washington himself composed: the deep and long-lasting bond between Judaism and the American idea, and therefore the deep antipathy of Israel-haters for America.

The pro-Hamas rallies proclaiming their support for jihad are reflecting not only their hatred of Jewry and of Israel, but also their hatred of America itself. The two hatreds are joined; those seeking the destruction of the Jews living “from the river to the sea” instinctively understand that the bond between American and Israel is more than pragmatic, and the rallies’ defense of utter evil in the name of “decolonization” reflects a set of ideas proclaiming that America itself is a villain and unworthy of existence. There is a reason why the Jewish gathering on the Mall featured countless American flags, while the mobs in New York, Philadelphia, and the quads of the Ivy League raging “long live the intifada” feature nary a one.

Washington famously concluded his letter to Newport’s Jews with the prayer that “the children of the stock of Abraham” dwell in safety and security in America, where “there shall be none to make them afraid.” Unfortunately, the children of the stock of Abraham in America are afraid, and for good reason. But there is still succor and inspiration to be found: from a Jewry that is experiencing more unity than at most points in American history, and in a vast swath of Americans who understand the bond between the Jewish and American stories. It is this that must be emphasized, as we remind our fellow citizens that what is at stake in this battle is not only the future of American Jewry, but of the American idea—and therefore of America itself.★★
After Hamas is destroyed, here are the five things that must not happen in Gaza

by RICHARD GOLDBERG

ISRAEL IS RESOLVED to remove Hamas and its terrorist infrastructure from the Gaza Strip permanently, and for much of the world, its determination raises one question more than any other: What comes next in Gaza? For those who disapprove of Israel’s actions in the war or those who either passively or actively support the role of Hamas as the Strip’s governing authority, the lack of answers provides a pretext not only to demand a permanent cease-fire but to suggest (often quietly and with a furrowed brow indicating supposed realpolitik wisdom) that the path Israel seems to be making for itself is a dead end from which it needs to be saved.

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For the Arab world, the vacuum creates a jockeying for power and influence, albeit behind the scenes to avoid accountability for anything that goes wrong.

For the Biden administration, this has invited fantasies of a renewed path to an ever-elusive two-state solution—a Palestinian Authority governing a unified West Bank and Gaza, and supposedly representing the views of all Palestinians in negotiations with Israel. Big ideas for Gaza’s future are being cooked up behind closed doors in Washington. Task forces and blue-ribbon commissions are sure to follow. But allowing the Washington establishment to paint a foreign policy on a blank canvas, mapping the relations between Israel and the Arabs surrounding it, is a risky proposition that will, as it always has in the past, fail.

If Washington and Jerusalem share an end-state objective of a Gaza that can never again pose a terror threat to Israel, and the president himself has said repeatedly that we do share this objective, the question about the future needs to be reframed. Instead of asking what comes next, leaders in both capitals should be asking: What cannot come next? Answering that question is the only way to establish the parameters for a viable path forward that precludes the known ingredients for policy failure.

Let us lay out some of those parameters.

First, Gaza has no future with Hamas or other terrorist groups involved. Perhaps obvious to some but not to all, Hamas and other terrorist organizations cannot be part of Gaza’s future. Demands for a cease-fire in Gaza before Hamas is dismantled would guarantee that the territory remains a base of terror operations indefinitely. Relenting to international pressure or Hamas psychological-warfare tactics to extend the cease-fire to a permanent condition would doom the future of Gaza (and Israel).

Unimaginative naysayers and Hamas apologists alike will try to persuade us there is no military solution to Hamas, only a political one. That is a lie that Israel’s military can expose if given the opportunity to finish the job.

Failing to halt Israel’s military objectives, Hamas supporters in the West and those who oppose Israel’s self-assertions more generally will grow more desperate. They will move beyond urging Congress and the White House to “condition” aid to Israel as a method of halting the Jewish state’s campaign to destroy Hamas and prevent another October 7 massacre, which is the line taken up by Senators Bernie Sanders and Chris Murphy and members of the “squad” in the House of Representative. Adding conditions to American security assistance to Israel—a fellow democracy that upholds the rule of law and is now fighting for its survival—should not be deemed a “worthwhile thought,” as President Biden claimed over the Thanksgiving weekend. Rather, it is a proposal aimed at delegitimizing Israel’s right to defend itself that would lead, logically, to the eventual annihilation of the Jewish state.

Pro-Israel Democrats in Congress have already publicly rejected the idea. And with a Republican-controlled House, there’s no path for Hamas to achieve this objective in Washington legislatively. President Biden might have the executive power to withhold critical military support from Israel when Jerusalem calls for resupply, but with a recent NBC News survey showing independent voters favoring military assistance to Israel, and Democrats evenly split, Biden would pay a steep political price for doing so. (Republicans overwhelmingly favor Israel.)

Assuming Israel stays the course (with U.S. backing), Hamas will lose control of Gaza in the weeks and months ahead. Its tunnels will be destroyed, its leadership eliminated. But Jerusalem and Washington will still need to prevent its supporters from finding a path back to power through Western-supported mechanisms.

Those who pushed Israel in 2006 into accepting Palestinian elections that included Hamas should not repeat their mistakes. We should expect attempts by Hamas’s ideological supporters to sponsor a new group with a new name to regain a foothold in Gaza’s governance and ultimately participate in any future Palestinian election—the vehicle Hamas first used to gain control 17 years ago.

Anyone who claims to champion the cause of Palestinian freedom and independence should focus on establishing the rule of law and protecting basic

For more than a decade, Qatar pumped hundreds of millions of dollars into Hamas on the promise it would moderate the group and separate its leaders from Iran. That was a scam run on naive officials in Washington and Jerusalem.
 rights within Palestinian territories before proposing elections. And any future elections should prohibit political parties that refuse to recognize Israel's right to exist, let alone those that advocate its destruction.

Second, Israel cannot repeat the mistake of unilaterally abandoning security control of Gaza. No single policy decision looms larger over the events of October 7 than the decision of former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in 2005 to “disengage” militarily from Gaza. The Palestinian Authority’s security services proved incapable of holding the territory, and Hamas used the vacuum left by Israel to take the Strip by force. Israel gave up security control believing it would get peace in return. Instead, it got more than 10,000 rockets and a metastasized Hamas threat on its border over the subsequent 15 years, leading to the massacre of October 7. As part of its current operations in Gaza, Israel is re-establishing key corridors of security control that would allow the Israel Defense Forces to rapidly respond to terror threats as they emerge in future months and years in real time—not just for the defense of Israel but for the defense of whatever civilian government will follow Hamas’s destruction.

Detractors of Israel will falsely label this a reoccupation of Gaza, giving Hamas supporters rallying in the streets and on college campuses something new to condemn. Let them do so (though challenge them at every turn when they do). Such radicals cannot dictate the future of Israel’s security and the stability of a post-Hamas Gaza Strip. Israel’s long-term security control over Gaza—alongside Palestinian civilian control—is the only viable path that safeguards the end-state objective of preventing Gaza from reemerging as a staging ground for terrorism.

What that ultimately looks like will be guided by Israeli security assessments. There may be a no-man’s-land buffer zone between Israel’s border with Gaza and the nearest population center. There may never again be a border crossing between Israel and Gaza, which will put the onus on Egypt to integrate Gaza economically with the Arab world and provide utilities and services. It will likely be decades before Israel will again serve as a source of jobs—and intelligence information leading to kidnappings and slaughters—for residents of the Gaza Strip.

New border-security measures will be required along the Mediterranean coast and, most important, along the Egyptian border. Iran cannot be permitted to succeed in smuggling weapons—and perhaps operatives—into Gaza via Egypt or the sea. That will require strict conditions on aid to Egypt, which will put unprecedented pressure on Cairo to work with Israel to keep its Gaza border secure.

Whatever the arrangements, Washington policymakers should remember that putting pressure on Israel to withdraw its military from Gaza would guarantee a repeat of history—ultimately condemning the people of Gaza to more years of suffering under renewed terrorist rule.

Third, no country that ever sponsored or provided safe harbor to Hamas can be allowed any role in Gaza’s future. Primarily, that rules out any Qatari or Turkish involvement in a post-Hamas Gaza. Doha and Ankara are ideological allies of Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. Their decades-long financial, political, and media support for the Islamist radicalization of Gaza should be met with international sanctions and condemnations, not invitations to donor summits and diplomatic roundtables.

Qatar, in particular, has a long history of support for radical Islamists in the Middle East. Doha played host to 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed in the 1990s. The Qatari interior minister even helped KSM escape U.S. arrest prior to 9/11. U.S. officials in 2014 identified Qatar as a “permissive jurisdiction” for financing ISIS and the al-Nusra Front, then a Syrian affiliate of al-Qaeda.

When Hamas came to power in Gaza, it was Qatar that led the charge to defy an international embargo aimed at breaking the terror group’s control. When Hamas needed a new home for its Damascus-based leaders at the height of the Syrian civil war, it was Qatar offering to pay Arab countries such as Jordan to host Hamas. And it was Qatar that ultimately volunteered for the job, albeit with the tacit approval of the Obama administration.

For more than a decade, Qatar pumped hun-
With a virulent anti-Semite at the helm of the Palestinian Authority—Mahmoud Abbas, who literally holds a doctorate in Holocaust denial—there is no hope for peace between Israel and Palestinians living in the West Bank, let alone with a PA-controlled Gaza Strip.

dreds of millions of dollars into Hamas on the promise that it would moderate the group and separate its leaders from Iran. That was a scam run on naive officials in Washington and Jerusalem. While Israel was lulled into a false sense of security, Hamas used the money to build the terror tunnel network we see today. The blood of 5,000 Israelis dead and wounded, including American citizens, is on Qatar as much as Iran.

The emir of Qatar knows all of this. And so, within minutes of October 7, to salvage its image and save its relationship with Washington, Doha reportedly called the White House offering to broker hostage negotiations with Hamas. This was the ultimate case of an arsonist pretending to help extinguish the fire he had started. And as Qatar has repeatedly stated throughout the past week, its objective is simple: the end of Israeli military operations and the survival of its ally, Hamas.

There will be a time of reckoning for Qatar soon. Congress should strip the country of its Major Non-NATO Ally status, move the U.S. airbase outside Doha to a new location, shut down Qatar’s pro-Hamas Al Jazeera operation in the West, and threaten sanctions if Qatar doesn’t terminate all material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization. The Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act should also be amended to allow victims of Qatar-sponsored Hamas terrorism to sue for damages. Similar measures should be considered for Turkey, too. Washington should focus on shutting down Hamas offices in both countries and demanding the extradition of Hamas leaders within their borders.

As for Gaza’s future, Congress should condition all future U.S. foreign assistance on the White House’s precluding Hamas state sponsors from every aspect of post-Hamas reconstruction. Not a dime of Qatari or Turkish money should ever be allowed into Palestinian territories again. No political parties or politicians financially backed by Qatar or Turkey should be included in any governing coalition.

**Fourth, no political party or governing authority that pledges to destroy Israel, promotes terrorism against Israel, or pushes economic warfare against Israel can be part of a post-Hamas Gaza.** Most reasonable people in Washington are probably nodding their heads in agreement reading that last statement. But they’d be shocked to learn that this principle excludes the Palestinian Authority (PA) from any role in Gaza.

The PA pays people to carry out terror attacks against Israelis—a government policy commonly known to policymakers as “Pay for Slay.” The PA actively promotes the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) campaign around the globe, pursuing political and economic warfare against Israel to delegitimize the existence of the Jewish state.

PA textbooks and television teach Palestinian children to hate and kill Jews—an indoctrination of violent anti-Semitism that the world saw manifested on October 7. The PA has yet to condemn the Hamas massacre. Indeed, its television celebrated in the hours that followed while the government more recently has spread conspiracy theories that Israel carried out the attacks.

A recent survey of Palestinian opinion claimed 83 percent of West Bank residents supported the October 7 massacre. That’s evident from the videos of Palestinians cheering in the streets and holding Hamas flags when Israel released more than 150 terrorists into the West Bank and eastern Jerusalem as part of the hostage-release negotiation. Palestinians in the West Bank also summarily executed two people accused of collaborating with Israel against Hamas. Their bodies hung from electrical towers as the local population cheered.

With a virulent anti-Semite at the helm of the PA—Mahmoud Abbas, who literally holds a doctorate in Holocaust denial—there is no hope for peace between Israel and Palestinians living in the West Bank, let alone with a PA-controlled Gaza Strip. Making matters worse, Abbas is 88 with no apparent successor, and Iranian-backed terror cells now operate through out PA territory with impunity, prompting almost daily IDF military operations to arrest militants and seize weapons.

Put simply, the Oslo-era experiment of the PA, which was created in the negotiations that led to the return of Yasser Arafat from exile to Ramallah, has proven a complete and utter failure in delivering peace.

*After Hamas is destroyed, here are the five things that must not happen in Gaza: January 2024*
with Israel within the territories it governs today. Absent fundamental reforms to address its litany of ills, the PA should not be allowed to spread this failure to Gaza, too.

**Fifth, international organizations that promote anti-Semitism or incitement against Israel, that are complicit in Hamas war crimes, and that fail to submit their staff and contractors to U.S. counterterrorism vetting cannot be trusted to help build a better future for Gaza.** One UN agency bears the greatest responsibility for enabling and subsidizing Hamas, while indoctrinating a generation of Palestinians to commit a massacre of Jews like the one on October 7: the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). The people of Gaza are not refugees—four generations of them have literally been born there—and treating them like refugees both lowers their standard of living and supports a political narrative that Palestinians will one day push the Jews into the Mediterranean Sea. Since the UN views Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, and a host of other U.S.-designated terrorist organizations as political groups, UNRWA does not prohibit what Washington would deem terror affiliations among its employees, contractors, and beneficiaries. The schools where Palestinian kids are taught to hate and kill Jews are UNRWA-run schools. Hamas established its terror tunnel network right under UNRWA facilities.

UNRWA provides Palestinians a vision of despair and endless conflict with Israel—a vision that fundamentally undermines any hope for peace and prosperity in Gaza. If ever there was a moment to try a new approach for the delivery of humanitarian aid in the Palestinian territories, this is that moment. The people of Gaza might not be refugees, but they are most certainly internally displaced persons (IDPs), and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the most qualified and respected international agency to care for IDPs and plan for their future. Congress should insist that UNHCR take the lead in Gaza alongside the U.S. and anti-Hamas Arab partners working to build self-sufficiency instead of dependency on international welfare. If this test case of eliminating UNRWA in Gaza shows demonstrable economic results for Palestinians, it will serve as a model for how to address the same problems UNRWA has created in the West Bank.

UNRWA, of course, like the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), proved complicit in Hamas using hospitals as terror bases, which is a war crime. In a terror tunnel under the Shasti hospital, Israeli troops found evidence that hostages had been held there—with a baby bottle left on top of a box bearing the WHO logo. Video evidence pulled from Shifa hospital shows hostages brought through the hospital on October 7—a prominent base of operations not just for Hamas but for the ICRC, too. One released hostage, an 83-year-old Israeli woman, came back to freedom with a body temperature at 40 degrees because the ICRC refused to provide her with any medical care once she was remanded into the organization's custody. The world cannot turn a blind eye to these agencies' complicity in crimes against humanity. Congress provides hundreds of millions of dollars per year to both the WHO and the ICRC. That funding should be put on hold pending U.S. and Israeli-led investigations that yield leadership changes and systemic reforms.

These are five starting points for clear parameters on what should not come next in Gaza. Hamas should not be present in any form. Israel should not withdraw its forces. Qatar and Turkey should not be involved. The PA should not be in charge. UNRWA and other Hamas-enabling agencies should not play a role. Instead of using a blank canvas, policymakers should be forced to paint inside these lines to enable the best possible outcome in Gaza.»
Hating Jews and Israel: The View from London

How bad are things on Shakespeare’s ‘sceptered isle’?

By Jonathan Foreman

LONDON—THREE DAYS on from October 7, like many other people here in Britain and around the world, I was still absorbing the full horror of that day and the shock of Israel’s revealed inability to defend its population from Hamas’s slaughter squads. Thanks to social media, and in particular Elon Musk’s renamed Twitter, I had seen many of the snuff videos posted by delighted Gazans after they went house to house, car to car, or across the fields in pursuit of victims of all ages. Just about everyone who uses social media had some idea of the visceral, medieval savagery of that morning’s killings. People here who relied on TV news did not: The British TV establishment, led by the BBC, chose not to run the abundant footage taken on Hamas cellphones and body cameras.

Having so recently watched the videos of corpse defilement, of bloodied, evidently raped girls bundled into jeeps, I was all the more surprised when around the corner from my apartment, I caught sight of a middle-aged blonde woman holding a ladder for a man hanging strings of Palestine flags and two large banners from the twin balconies of their large stucco

Jonathan Foreman is an Anglo-American journalist who covered the Iraq War for the New York Post and has written frequently over the years for Commentary.
Every Saturday since 10/7, London has endured large anti-Israel demonstrations. At each one, students, Palestine-obsessives, Islamists, and hard-left extremists march.
As British Jews have begun to realize, it is only a small step from selective inaction by the police to turning a blind eye to the beatings of Jews in the street, Weimar-style.

Much of the reaction here is similar to that in the United States. Here too, there is an entire generation of young people who know nothing of international politics or history they haven’t learned from TikTok and Instagram, and who have therefore been conditioned to hate Israel. We may have even more academics here than in the U.S. who think it’s clever to remove any real meaning from the word “genocide.” Here too the “de-colonization” narrative has been embraced by NGOs, city governments, and grant-giving institutions, and it’s linked to the propagandistic drive to mischaracterize Israel as a white “settler-colonial” society akin to Rhodesia or French Algeria.

The main difference may be that this country, or a section of its indigenous middle class, has long had a “thing” about Palestine, i.e., about Israel. Among upper-middle-class women, the Palestinian cause has come to inspire the kind of passion that attached to anti-nuclear campaigning and the Greenham Common movement of the 1980s. To some degree, this obsession derives from the old-fashioned romantic Arabism that affected much of the ruling class during the 20th century, although there has never been any British activism on behalf of Arabs oppressed by other Arabs or Iranians. British publishers and British authors—especially female ones—have been the prime foreign movers of the annual ‘Palfest’ Palestinian Festival of Literature, at which you would be hard-pressed to find any speakers keen to stress tolerance or the need of both sides to understand each other’s point of view.

The obsession with Palestine that grips swathes of the professional classes has large real-world consequences because Britons play such a disproportionate role as presenters, producers, and technical staff in English-language media around the world, such as CNN, Al-Jazeera, Euronews, and RT. Al Jazeera English, the global propaganda arm of the Qatari monarchy, and a mouthpiece for al-Qaeda and the Sunni Arab “resistance” during the Iraq War, was set up by British media veterans and is still dominated by them.

On the other hand, anti-Israel animus is hardly something that unites the nation. Working-class white (and Afro-Caribbean) people are generally less likely to be drawn to the anti-Zionist cause, even though the hanging of two British army sergeants by the Irgun in 1947 fomented a genuine popular hostility to Israel for a couple of decades, and even though relatively mild anti-Semitism was rife in British working-class communities until the 1960s.

It is telling that, unlike actors and journalists and lawyers, British rock and pop stars, many of whom are working-class in background, consistently defy pressure to boycott Israel (Roger Waters, formerly of Pink Floyd, and a lifelong anti-Semite, is the exception that proves the rule). The UK’s military and security establishment are much more pro-Israel today than they were even 30 years ago (let alone in the immediate aftermath of Palestine’s partition) and often work closely with their Israeli equivalents.

The behavior of many anti-Israel demonstrators has done the cause few favors in the wider society. It won few converts when pro-Hamas activists brought railway stations to a halt in cities across the country, in several of them harassing elderly Royal British Legion sellers of Remembrance Day poppies. Their joyful desecration of public monuments in London, including war memorials and statues of national figures, was an awkward reminder of the degree to which the indigenous culture is held in contempt by the sort of person who believes that beheading babies, or gang-raping teenaged girls before killing them, is a justified response to “colonial” oppression.

Bizarrely, British police forces are much more understanding of the demonstrators’ conduct and attitudes than the general public is. In London and Manchester, officers were filmed tearing down posters of kidnapped children taken to Gaza. They claimed it was in order to “avoid community tension,” police commanders having apparently determined that calling for the release of Hamas hostages was somehow offensive to Arabs and Muslims. However, the craven behavior of London’s Metropolitan Police at the largest demonstrations—during one of them, a pair of officers posed for photographs with toddlers dressed and masked up as Hamas terrorists—has brought that force into even greater disrepute, along with the stringent laws against “hate speech” that for some reason are rarely enforced against mullahs who give anti-Jewish sermons.

Even so, the failures of the police hint at a dark future. As British Jews have begun to realize, it is only a
No British administration since the founding of the Jewish state in 1948 has been as stalwart in its support of Israel and its right to defend itself as that of Rishi Sunak.

small step from these kinds of selective inaction by the police to turning a blind eye to the beatings of Jews in the street, Weimar-style—if carried out by passionate young men from certain highly sensitive communities. It would be a different story if the assailants came from the miniscule “far right.”

Then there is the fact that it may be only a matter of time before the sheer size of solidly anti-Zionist ethnic minorities and their political domination of certain cities start to have an impact on central government policy. It is just as well that Britain’s system of parliamentary government uses a “first past the post” voting system, which tends to disadvantage small, non-mainstream political parties. If it had proportional representation like many continental states (and Israel), Islamist parties might long ago have played a key role in the forming of coalition governments.

Hence a new phenomenon in British Jewish life: late-night “what if” conversations. What if anti-Semitism at home were to spread in the guise of an anti-Zionism that happily targets Jewish businesses, individuals, and places of worship? And what if Israel were to collapse under a multifront attack (which no longer seems as impossible as it once did) and disappear as a sanctuary? Where would you and your family go? Not France—despite President Emmanuel Macron’s creditable zero-tolerance policy on anti-Semitic demonstrations. Not Germany, where the small Jewish community has to be protected from anti-Semites from Syria who were invited to settle by former Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2015. Almost all the Western European countries have imported millions of Jew-haters from less enlightened parts of the Third World—often encouraged, as in Britain, by progressive Jews who chose to imagine inflows of economic migrants as the equivalent of the kindertransports. Poland, Portugal, even Serbia—these might be the safest bets if the worst comes to the worst and you cannot escape to the United States.

All that said, it has not all been dismaying news. Other than the Guardian, the mainstream British newspapers reacted to the 10/7 attacks with the shock and disgust you would expect from decent people. Even more reassuring has been the reaction of the British government. No British administration since the founding of the Jewish state in 1948 has been as stalwart in its support of Israel and its right to defend itself as that of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, who quickly declared, “There are not two sides to these events. There is no question of balance, I stand with Israel, we stand with Israel.”

When the objectively pro-Hamas protests got going, with jihadist groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir among the organizers,* Sunak made his disgust clear, telling a Jewish community group, “We’ve already seen vile words on our streets … I say not here, not in Britain, not in our country, not in this century. My first duty is to protect you, we will not tolerate this hate, we will not tolerate this anti-Semitism, and I promise you I will stop at nothing to keep you safe.”

Many Jewish and pro-Israel Britons have also been impressed by the opposition leader, Sir Keir Starmer. The resolute stance taken by the Labour Party chief took even more courage than Sunak’s: The party is still awash in radicals who supported the openly anti-Zionist Corbyn, and many Labour MPs represent constituencies with large South Asian communities in which anti-Israel sentiment is extreme and anti-Semitism is rife.

The royal family has also been more forthright in defense of Israel than ever before. King Charles immediately “condemned barbaric acts of terrorism against the people of Israel” without any qualification, as did the Prince and Princess of Wales. The response of the government and the royal family has been all the more remarkable given the enormous power and influence in the UK of Qatar, the oil rich Gulf state that backs and hosts Hamas’s leaders, having previously backed and hosted the Taliban leadership, subsidized al-Qaeda, ISIS, and various branches of the Muslim-Brotherhood.

The stance of the country’s top leaders feels all the more reassuring given the morally miserable response to the new war by the prime ministers of Ireland and Spain. Sad to say, much of the most overtly anti-Semitic discourse in the British Isles since the October 7 attacks has come from Eire. Niall Holohan, a retired Irish diplomat, explained to the Guardian what

* On October 7, a few hours after the first reports from Israel, Hizb ut-Tahrir UK tweeted, “If this can be done by a resistance group, imagine what a unified response from the Muslim world could achieve.”
As I write this, more than 100,000 people are marching peacefully and without calls for anyone to be exterminated, in the first march against anti-Semitism staged in London.

he considered to be Ireland’s principled approach to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict by “the relative lack of influence” of Ireland’s tiny Jewish population—echoing inadvertently the notorious scene in Joyce’s Ulysses in which the anti-Semitic schoolteacher Deasy rejoices in the fact that Ireland “never let them in!” (It is no coincidence that in the past few decades some of the most hostile Anglophone media coverage of Israel has come from Irish journalists working for British and foreign news organizations, among them the BBC’s Orla Guerin, notorious for stories such as “How the Israelis stole Christmas.”)

British public opinion might shift more in an anti-Israel direction in the months to come owing to reports and imagery of suffering in the brutal war in Gaza, where the BBC, Sky, and other news organizations rely on Hamas-employed or -approved stringers. Still, as I write this, more than 100,000 people are marching peacefully and without calls for anyone to be exterminated, in the first march against anti-Semitism to be staged in London. It is an impressive number (there are only 270,000 Jews in the entire country) and one that suggests considerable participation by non-Jews. It also suggests that Hamas and its local allies have not cowed and will not cowl those who stand in solidarity with the victims of October 7.

Hating Jews and Israel: The View from London: January 2024
What ‘Free Palestine’ and ‘Black Lives Matter’ Have in Common

An oppressor-oppressed narrative is trapping the world in a state of false consciousness

By Wilfred Reilly

The second I saw the first rowdy pro-Hamas march in a big American city, I felt an incredible sense of déjà vu. For what is the “Free Palestine” movement in America more than a recapitulation of Black Lives Matter and other forms of black American activism over the past decade? In both cases, left-wing partisans who see human interactions in terms of oppressor/oppressed dynamics are claiming their group faces serious problems because of external abuse—and denying that their group has played any role in the controversies involving them. In both cases, whatever truth there may be in the initial complaint, the matters that trigger these movements are far more complex and have almost entirely internal causes. And, in both cases, shameless self-billed “local leaders” and other hucksters prevent any discussion of how to fix these real problems.

Some level of sympathy for the groups in question is entirely understandable. Black Americans, of course, were slaves in the United States for almost a century, from 1776 to 1865. Large areas of the South remained racially segregated for decades longer, until 1954’s Brown v. Board Supreme Court decision. The U.S. Civil Rights Act, which rendered most forms of racial discrimination illegal, did not become law until 10 years after that.

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And so on: Over the course of American history, at least 3,445 blacks (and almost 1,500 whites) were lynched by angry mobs—often hanged publicly or burnt alive. It is difficult to read through a substantive text on black American history without feeling some sadness about our nation’s past, as well as great respect for my race’s successful struggle for equality.

The same is true when it comes to sympathy for the Palestinian cause. With the British division of the imperial provinces of Transjordan and Mandatory Palestine into Jewish-majority Israel and Arab-majority Jordan following World War II, and the war that broke out between Israel and surrounding Arab powers, hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs left or were driven off their family lands. More than 750,000 of these people and their descendants (up to 5.9 million by some quirky estimates) remain technical “refugees” today, living in such areas of resettlement as the Gaza Strip’s giant Jabalia “refugee camp.” An entire UN Department exists to meet their needs.

Many or most of those Palestinians initially left their lands because Arab generals who commanded forces then invading Israel told them to do so to give hostile armies a better shot at striking into and destroying the nascent Jewish state. By now, nearly eight decades later, several Gaza and West Bank refugee settlements are sizeable cities full of multistory buildings. But the narrative of Palestinian displacement is an understandably upsetting one for many people even now.

And both communities, black and Palestinian, face significant problems, which are tempting to blame on historical oppression and defeat. In the United States, for example, the rate of serious violent crime among African Americans is currently 2.4 times the rate among white Americans. The median black score on the pre-college SAT exam stands at 941, versus roughly 1100 for non-Hispanic whites (itself hardly a stellar score: Asian-American kids and Jewish students now bring home almost a 1250). A sizable income gap persists between the races: The average black male between 30 and 39 earns $51,000 annually, versus a median income of $71,000 for white men of the same age.

The problems for Palestinians are even simpler and more brutal to sum up. Annual per capita GDP in-side the densely populated Gaza Strip (officially) stands at just $5,600. The place is literally run by criminals: The elected, and rather popular, governing party is the terrorist group Hamas. What could the cause of such structural failures be? One obvious default is the idea that the blame belongs to oppression. The government of Israel, in the Palestinian case, must surely be blocking humanitarian assistance and business development to Gaza and other Palestinian regions, and preventing the construction of infrastructure there.

In both cases, the idea that oppression is the primary cause of the failure of civil society is forwarded, aggressively and constantly, by persuasive demagogues. The argument that the sole cause of all performance gaps between large racial groups is “racism”—and not, say, culture, regional or religious effects, stochastic randomness, genetic factors, or even the effects of past history—is the core theme of Ibram Kendi’s bestselling pseudo-scholarship. One of America’s leading attorneys, Ben Crump, published a bestselling book arguing that black Americans are experiencing a “genocide” and that rebellion against this state of abuse explains much crime.

Much the same sort of thing is frequently said about Palestine. Almost immediately on the heels of the horrific terrorist attacks of October 7—during which some young women were raped so often and savagely that their pelvises broke—34 of the leading student institutions in a small but prominent college called Harvard signed a formal letter assigning all blame for the attacks, and for conditions in Palestine, to the Israeli “occupation” regime. One of these organizations, rather remarkably, was Amnesty International.

The only problem with these arguments, to put this in the highly technical language of professional wonkery, is that they are stupid and wrong. The key weakness of the contention that black community issues such as high crime are due to contemporary racism (or, for that matter, to genetics) is that most of them did not exist to anywhere near the same extent in the past, despite the fact that the makeup of the black population was largely identical and the ethnic conflict with whites was far worse. As I have documented, the black murder rate roughly doubled during the recent “Black Lives Matter” era alone: It currently stands at an astounding 32/100,000 per year, which is higher than the Caucasian suicide rate.

This tragic final average merely reflects the end-point of a long and disturbing trend. As writers
such as Mona Charen have documented, American and particularly black American crime rates began to surge following the liberalization of “blue city” justice systems in the 1960s and 1970s. Astonishingly, murders increased from roughly 8,000 to 24,530 between the years 1963 and 1993, and serious aggravated assaults increased from 174,210 to 1,135,610. While U.S. crime did decline significantly during the post-Giuliani-and-Bratton 2000s, homicides have climbed back to more than 20,000 annually during the past several years. More than half of all recent murder victims have been black, something hardly characteristic even of the Jim Crow era. If we choose to add fatherlessness to this analysis, the African-American out-of-wedlock birth rate stood at just 11 percent in 1938—in contrast to 69 percent today (alongside a rate of 36 percent for whites). Racism is the cause? Not likely.

Same for the Palestinians. In the bluntest possible logical terms, most of the problems of, specifically, Gaza cannot be laid at the feet of Israel...because Israel has not occupied or ruled the Gaza Strip since 2005. Far more of them, in fact, can be laid at the feet of Hamas, the terrorist group that has been in charge of the area since 2007. Among many other objectively insane actions, Hamas's leaders ordered or allowed the destruction of the great majority of the infrastructure left behind by some 10,000 departing Jews, who fled the region following an Israeli pullback (thus, of course, being “forced to abandon their family lands”)—including the once-legendary floral greenhouses of the Strip.

Since that point, Hamas has systematically looted the potentially rich lands under its control—at one point rather literally beating plowshares into swords by using miles of state-of-the-art sewer pipe sent by the international aid community to make rocket-launcher tubes. Gaza and the other component region of recognized Palestine (the West Bank) have in fact received many billions of dollars in recent humanitarian aid, because of the sympathetic nature of some Palestinian claims, and much of this lucre has simply vanished or been stolen. Quite a bit of it, to judge from viral retrospectives of what Gaza City looked like before the Israel-Hamas war, was diverted into luxury villas for Hamas commanders and their dependents—some of whom could give even BLM lessons on mansion purchase and maintenance.

More seriously—although the theft of billions from poor people is serious enough—legitimately unpleasant realities of day-to-day Palestinian life such as Israeli checkpoint monitoring of the Gaza and West Bank borders are also caused almost entirely by the behavior of the Palestinian governments. Tens of thousands of rocket attacks against the Jewish state have taken place just since 2001. There is actually a professional website that keeps precise track of how long Israel "has been rocket free" at any given time: The clock sat at 56 minutes and 21 seconds when I last checked in. Obviously, no nation could ethically, or would logically, leave itself trusting and defenseless in the face of such a constant military-level threat. However—to indulge in a bit of cliché—it is a safe bet that, were the Palestinian regimes ever to genuinely stop attacking Israel, for a trust-building period of a few years, and sue for peace, a peace would soon follow. A true Palestinian state likely would as well. It happened with Egypt, Israel's foremost enemy during its first 30 years of existence, and it would happen with the Palestinians as well. It has become popular to forget this, but Israel has placed serious who-gets-what packages on the table at least seven times during statehood negotiations. In my read, the primary barrier to at least four of those becoming reality was the plain irascibility of Palestinian leadership.

In both the Palestinian and black American cases, the critical final point is this: Achieving what is presumably every sane person's end-game goal—actual improvements in the lot of currently troubled communities—will require total rejection of trendy oppressor v. oppressed narratives and demand a hard focus on what the actual problems in each case are. In reality, most issues in modern black America have far less to do with contemporary racism—Nigerian Americans do not experience them, and such issues did not exist when racism was more intense—than with excuse-making about crime and a distinctly disengaged attitude toward school and study. And, in reality, the farther-away issues of Palestinians have far less to do with “unchanging, unprovoked Israeli oppression” than with rule by bloodthirsty terrorist kleptocrats who literally refuse to make peace.

In neither case will resolving these issues be easy even once we recognize and bluntly name them. However, doing so will remain eternally impossible if we do not. 

Commentary
Joseph, my friend Edward Shils said to me, “we have spoken about many things, among them about various writers, but we are both too civilized ever to talk about Shakespeare. After all, what could one say?” Yes, what can one say? Over a long writing career, I have never written about Shakespeare, and, best I can recall, among the many millions of words I have produced, have never even quoted him. Truth is, I have long admired Shakespeare without being especially nuts about him.

Shakespeare’s reputation is, of course, at least two stages above the iconic. In the vast library of writings about him, Shakespeare’s genius is rarely if ever at issue; most writing about him sets itself to certify that genius or explain how it works. Harold Bloom, never one for the light touch, wrote that Shakespeare “taught us to understand human nature”; his power of creating personalities is “beyond explanation”; and he is ultimately “a system of northern lights, an aurora borealis visible where most of us will never go ... almost too vast to apprehend.” Bloom’s final book carries the title Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human.

Samuel Johnson extolled Shakespeare, as did Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Hazlitt. In Tales from Shakespeare, Charles Lamb and his sister Mary wrote a book retelling Shakespeare’s comedies and tragedies for children. In 1946, W.H. Auden gave a yearlong course at the New School for Social Research on Shakespeare that filled the school’s auditorium to capacity. Shakespeare has had no shortage of passionate admirers.

On the other, the contra, side, Tolstoy contemned Shakespeare at considerable length. In the essay in which he did so, Tolstoy calls Shakespeare “an insignificant and inartistic writer.” Tolstoy held that the un-
That Shakespeare wrote 37 plays under the pressure of commercial production is impressive. Yet Shakespeare was better at deploying language than at contriving plots.

mitigated worship of Shakespeare really took international flight with Goethe's admiration for him at the turn of the 19th century, which spread to the point that, for any young person, "when he is reading or listening to Shakespeare the question for him is no longer whether Shakespeare be good or bad, but only: In what consists that extraordinary beauty, both esthetic and ethical, of which he has been assurred by learned men whom he respects, and which he himself neither sees nor feels?"

Absent from Shakespeare, for Tolstoy, was the religious essence of art. By this Tolstoy meant not Christianity or any specific religion, "not the direct inculcation of any religious truths in an artistic guise, and not an allegorical demonstration of these truths, but the exhibition of a definite view of life corresponding to the highest religious understanding of a given time, which, serving as the motive for the composition of the drama, penetrates, to the knowledge of the author, through all of his work. So it has always been with true art, and so it is with every true artist in general and especially the dramatist." For Tolstoy, this element is crucially missing in Shakespeare. Toward the close of his essay, Tolstoy wrote:

If people wrote of Shakespeare that for his time he was a good writer, that he had a fairly good turn for verse, was an intelligent actor and good stage manager—even were this appreciation incorrect and somewhat exaggerated—if only it were moderately true, people of the rising generation might remain free from Shakespeare's influence. But when every young man entering into life in our time has presented to him, as the model of moral perfection, not the religious and moral teachers of mankind, but first of all Shakespeare, concerning whom it has been decided and handed down by learned men from generation to generation, as an incontestable truth, that he was the greatest poet, the greatest teacher of life, the young man cannot remain free from this pernicious influence.

Tolstoy was not alone in being unconvinced of Shakespeare's genius. Voltaire, after first being an admirer of Shakespeare, later turned against him: "I was the first who showed to the French a few pearls which I found in his enormous dunghill." George Bernard Shaw wrote that "I have striven hard to open English eyes to the emptiness of Shakespeare's philosophy, to the superficiality and second-handedness of his morality, to his weakness and incoherence as a thinker, to his snobbery, his vulgar prejudices, his ignorance, his disqualifications of all sorts for the philosophic eminence claimed for him." T.S. Eliot, too, had his reservations, and about Hamlet Eliot wrote: "We must simply admit that here Shakespeare tackled a problem which proved too much for him. Why he attempted it at all is an insoluble puzzle; under compulsion of what experience he attempted to express the inexpressibly horrible, we cannot ever know."

Along with 154 sonnets, Shakespeare wrote 37 plays (38, according to Mel Brooks, who in his guise as the 2,000-Year-Old Man, claimed to have put money into the last one, Queen Alexandra and Murray, which closed in Egypt.) Of these, Hamlet, Romeo & Juliet, King Lear, Othello, Macbeth, The Merchant of Venice, and Julius Caesar are at the center of the canon of Anglophone literature. All have brilliant touches, memorable characters, word-music playing throughout. That Shakespeare wrote these and his other plays under the pressure of commercial production is all the more impressive. Yet Shakespeare was better at deploying language than at contriving plots. D.H. Lawrence wrote: "How boring, how small Shakespeare's people are! / Yet the language so lovely! like the dyes from gas-tar."

In The Hollow Crown: Shakespeare on How Leaders Rise, Rule, and Fall, Eliot A. Cohen is firmly in the towering-genius camp. A counselor to the State Department under Condoleezza Rice and a former dean of the Paul H. Nitze School of International Studies at Johns Hopkins, Cohen is a political scientist with a literary bent. In The Hollow Crown, he sets out to establish that Shakespeare adumbrated nearly all the significant behavior of politicians and others in power (CEOs, university presidents and provosts, etc.). Read Shakespeare and you will better understand the behavior of politicians, past and present—that is the theme of The Hollow Crown. Cohen allows that

Commentary
insofar as politics is concerned, his [Shakespeare’s] focus is narrow: the dynamics of courts and the drama of power as theater. But that is room enough for us to learn whence power comes, how it is used, and how it is lost.”

Cohen takes his title from a speech of Richard in Richard II: “For within the hollow crown / That rounds the mortal temples of a king ...” He has organized his book around three central sections: Acquiring Power, Exercising Power, and Losing Power. Within these sections he takes up such matters of political leadership as inspiration, manipulation, magic, self-deception, departing office, and a final chapter on “Shakespeare's Political Vision.” In each section and subsection, he consults the plays of Shakespeare for his wisdom on the subject at hand.

Shakespeare’s historical plays take up much of these consultations, though Professor Cohen also deals at length with King Lear and Macbeth. More often than not, he begins with setting out what Shakespeare has to say about his various subjects, and then connects this to the careers of actual political figures—among them Winston Churchill, Adolph Hitler, Richard Nixon, Margaret Thatcher, Vladimir Putin, and others. (Steering clear of the uncomfortably current, he mentions Donald Trump only a few times in passing and Joe Biden merely once.) As Cohen notes at the close of his chapter “Magic and Self-Deception”: “Shakespeare teaches us that magical powers, or something that very much resembles them, can be real—but you still need to be able to count votes, fight battles, and make a prudent and clear getaway. Otherwise, you can find yourself deposed, overwhelmed in battle, or, in the worst case, burning at the stake.”

Cohen allows that Shakespeare had no discernible politics, or at least, none that can be conveniently labeled monarchist or republican, right or left, liberal or conservative. “We do not know Shakespeare’s political views or, indeed, whether he had any,” he writes. Tolstoy found this among the most distressing things about him. Shakespeare, in his view, had “no convictions at all, but heaped up in his drama all possible events, horrors, fooleries, discussions, and effects.” Tolstoy thought art the most efficient and effective, means of putting humanity in touch with the mysteries of the universe, with heightening our conscious-ness of moral struggle, and with determining our place in it. The writing of Shakespeare’s having abandoned this primary role of serious art rendered his plays for Tolstoy “trivial and immoral.”

As for Cohen’s politics, they are centrist and measured. Evidence of this is found in his treatment of such modern political figures as Richard Nixon, Barack Obama, and others. He grants Nixon all his accomplishments—extricating America from Vietnam, opening relations with China, stabilizing them with the Soviet Union, repairing the welfare state—while recognizing that “if anything destroyed Nixon it was petty hatreds, his desire for revenge against those he believed looked down on him or had kicked him around.” After summarizing Nixon’s farewell speech upon his resignation from office, Professor Cohen concludes: “Like Cardinal Wolsey in Henry VIII, the fallen president had acquired bitter wisdom too late to benefit from it.”

Barack Obama is for Cohen almost a reverse case. He thinks Obama, who was rare in being undaunted by his attaining high office, suffered from what he calls “magical thinking, a belief that mere will or conviction or intelligence would translate into action.” As we now know, it didn’t; and Obama’s achievements in office, unlike Nixon’s, were few. “Like Prospero,” Professor Cohen writes, “Obama neglected the small arts of politics. This man—so celebrated at home and abroad—ended up with results that can only be described as mediocre.”

But the larger question raised by The Hollow Crown is whether we can truly learn significant lessons about politics and political life from Shakespeare’s plays. I not long ago wrote a brief book arguing that the novel, and imaginative literature generally, provided knowledge deeper than that provided by social science, history, and philosophy. I claimed that imaginative literature took up the crucial matter of human nature, that in dealing with particular cases and dramatizing them it exhibited life in its rich variety in a way no other discipline or division of learning did, that, in the words of Milan Kundera, it dealt with “the paradoxical nature of action” and “the role the irrational plays in our decisions in our own lives.” All this being so, I ought to be an ideal reader of The Hollow Crown.
Throughout Cohen’s pages I found myself doubtful that Shakespeare's plays have much to teach us about the life of politics. Politics, I believe, can be learned but not taught.

And yet throughout Cohen’s pages I found myself doubtful that Shakespeare’s plays have much to teach us about the life of politics. As with writing, quarterbacking, and lovemaking, politics, I believe, can be learned but not taught. Allow me to unravel what sounds like a Zen koan. Political ideas abound, from Plato and Aristotle, to Bacon and Machiavelli, to John Locke and Edmund Burke, to John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. But Shakespeare does not deal in ideas. Nor is he interested, as Professor Cohen notes, in economics or religion. His chief subject is kings and courtiers, and the acquisition, expenditure, and loss of monarchical power. He deals, as an imaginative artist ought, with particular cases and facts that may or may not turn into ideas, though, in Shakespeare’s case, they rarely do. One may be swept up by the stories he has to tell, but the usable takeaway from them is minimal at best.

Cohen would argue otherwise. His method in The Hollow Crown is to adduce a section of one of the plays, often explicating the text, and then show how the same or similar conduct has turned up in actual, usually contemporary politicians. He cites the course of murder that Macbeth, after having slain King Duncan, sets out on. His contemporary analog to Macbeth in this regard is Vladimir Putin, of whom he notes, in Ukraine, his “indiscriminate bombing of cities, the kidnapping of children, and the torture and assassination of Ukrainian officials escalated over time,” adding that “whether he had an inclination to stop or not, he no longer could.” But the notion of Putin as a modern Macbeth doesn’t persuade. Macbeth, who listened to witches, was in the end quite mad, Putin villainous beyond psychology.

Or take the case of John F. Kennedy, who appears in Cohen’s chapter “Inspiration.” After discussing the woe of inspiration in Henry Bolingbroke, later the key figure in Shakespeare’s Henry IV, he briefly takes up Winston Churchill, who through his brilliant use of language in his speeches in World War II did inspire the English against great odds to continue the fight and emerge victorious over the Nazis. Cohen then goes on to cite John F. Kennedy, who “himself inspired a generation in his presidential inaugural speech of 1961, evoking as he did the transition of leadership, at a critical moment in the Cold War, from the leaders of World War II to the subalterns who fought in it.” The problem here is how short-lived that inspiration was. Soon after delivering the speech—written, as is well known, not by him but by Ted Sorensen—Kennedy, fearing the loss of support in the South, failed fully to back the civil-rights movement and next set out on the misbegotten Bay of Pigs venture. Kennedy’s assassination, sad truth to tell, may have been a good career move when it comes to the historical record.

Cohen takes up the case of Lyndon Johnson in his chapter on manipulation. He finds “Shakespearean flaws” in Johnson. “Johnson,” he writes, “was a great manipulative leader, until he encountered a problem [the Vietnam War] he could not manipulate his way through. Henry V was an extraordinary leader, who could both inspire (in a way that Johnson never could) and manipulate. For both men, Fortune had the final say, no matter what their talents, aspirations, or dreams.”

Similarly, Cohen notes that “the tale of Margaret Thatcher’s fall … has themes that Shakespeare would have recognized.” In Xi Jinping’s ruthless rise to power, he finds that “a Shakespearean dynamic infuses these acts: some repression requires more, for the simple reason that one’s enemies accumulate over time.” He finds, too, the Bard in the fall of Nikita Khrushchev, who was “deposed by his own proteges … and at the peak of his power when the blow fell.” He compares Shakespeare’s Richard II to Ashraf Ghani, the last president of Afghanistan before he departed office and gave way to the Taliban.

I was surprised that Cohen did not compare the indecisiveness of Adlai Stevenson, who when running for president could not seem to get his tongue around the phrase “I want it,” to Hamlet. Or Hillary Clinton to Lady Macbeth: “Out, out blond Trump?” Or George W. Bush, the ultimate legatee, to Henry VI? Lining up contemporary politicians with Shakespearean characters—we have here, perhaps, the makings of a parlor game.

Throughout his relatively brief book, Cohen pauses to explain the contents of various speeches in Shakespeare and the characters of the figures making them. Some of these passages, old-fashioned explications de texte, run to 10 or more pages. Mid-book he offers an 18-page summary of Julius Caesar; a play I have long thought ought properly to have been given the title Marcus Brutus, for Brutus is its true subject. Along
the way, he quotes from many of these speeches, and that put me in mind of Tolstoy again, for according to the Russian, all characters in Shakespeare sound alike:

Shakespeare always speaks for kings in one and the same inflated, empty language. Also in one and the same Shakespearian, artificially sentimental language speak all the women who are intended to be poetic: Juliet, Desdemona, Cordelia, Imogen, Marina. In the same way, also, it is Shakespeare alone who speaks for his villains: Richard, Edmund, Iago, Macbeth, expressing for them those vicious feelings which villains never express.

Whatever the sameness of the speech Shakespeare allows his characters, he could nonetheless ring music out of words, rendering so many of them memorable. “To be or not to be: that is the question.” “The play’s the thing / Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the king.” “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women mere players.” “If music be the food of love, play on...” Life is “a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / signifying nothing.” “To thine own self be true.” “The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers.” “Ah, the Bible and Shakespeare,” an old joke runs, “so many clichés.”

I not long ago read seven of Shakespeare’s plays, thinking I would make my way through all of them before departing the planet. (Who knows, there may be a quiz at the gates of heaven or, more likely, to get out of that other place.) The plays I read are The Tempest, The Merry Lives of Windsor, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, Richard III, Henry VIII, Coriolanus, and Julius Caesar. Some I had read before. Not all gave pleasure. None blew me away. Might Mae West have been wrong when she said that you can’t have too much of a good thing? Or is Shakespeare perhaps, contra the world, not all that good a thing? In any case, were I packing those nine or 10 desert-island books, a volume of Shakespeare’s plays would not be among them.

What I find missing from the plays of William Shakespeare is engagement of a kind that is central to the writing I care most about. One admires his range, but not his depth. He could do comedy and tragedy, magic and realism, fools who are intelligent and kings who are fools, witches and bitches both. Yet he tends to view the world of his characters from 30,000 feet above the earth. More amused than concerned about the moral complexities of their plights, he sometimes seems more puppet master than playwright. Let others read him and rave on, I, for one, have had my fill of the old Bard of Stratford on Avon.
You don’t need to invent nonsense when you tell Napoleon’s story on screen

By Andrew Roberts

I ONCE asked Martin Scorsese why no epic biopic of Napoleon Bonaparte had been made since Abel Gance’s iconic movie of 1927. He replied that if the studio moguls hadn’t withdrawn the funding from Stanley Kubrick’s projected Napoleon film in the early 2000s, perhaps that would have been it, but that also there is always the possibility some personalities and lives are just too enormous to be fitted into 150 minutes on the silver screen.

Having worked in the Kubrick archive at the London Design Museum and seen the extraordinary lengths that he was willing to go to get everything accurate for the film—he even collected soil from Napoleon’s battlefields to get their colors right—I, too, believe that Kubrick’s was the greatest Napoleon film never made.

Kubrick’s efforts make it all the sadder that another great movie-maker, Ridley Scott (the director of Alien, Gladiator, and Blade Runner), could not be bothered to make his new $200 million Napoleon movie historically accurate, even though it would have been easy and virtually costless to do so, and the result would have been a far more interesting and nuanced film than the Napoleon he has released.

For in each case of Scott’s inventions and shortcuts, the truth would have made a far better story. That is the tragedy of this missed opportunity, which is essentially a triumph of spectacle over story. It should be said, however, that the spectacle is worth the price of the ticket alone. The cinematography is gorgeous; the uniforms and medals and palaces and dresses are superb; the street and battle scenes are excellent; the vast mise-en-scènes such as the coronation at Notre Dame and the burning of Moscow are memorable. Joaquin Phoenix and Vanessa Kirby act very well, too, albeit burdened with a cringemakingly terrible script by David Scarpa.

The film presents Napoleon’s career from the French Revolution in 1789 to his death on St. Helena in 1821 almost entirely through the prism of his love affair with Josephine. That is a perfectly reason-
able artistic stance to take, but it involves presenting the emperor making important decisions for very different reasons from the real ones, to the detriment of any real understanding of his motives and thus of his true personality. He is shown returning from the 1798 Egyptian campaign in order to confront Josephine with her infidelity, for example, whereas in fact it was to overthrow the Directory government of France. He is also shown returning from exile in Elba in 1815 to see Josephine, rather than to displace the Bourbons.

Now, this is a movie, not a documentary, but there are ways of showing that Napoleon was far more than a conqueror who had to divorce his wife for political reasons, and Scott never grasps any of them. His ludicrous inventions detract from the much more interesting aspects of the real Napoleon. Having Napoleon take part in cavalry charges, which he never once did, means we do not see him strategizing, which he did brilliantly. Having him bombard the Great Pyramid of Cheops, which also never happened, means we do not see him engaging with the intellectuals who founded Egyptology.

This self-defeating obsession with spectacle over truth leads Scott to present Napoleon's greatest victory, the battle of Austerlitz in December 1805, as being fought in a blizzard and won by Napoleon firing cannonballs at the ice and drowning the Austro-Russian army. The truth is that, unusually for that time of year, it did not snow that day. When what Bonapartists later lauded as “the sun of Austerlitz” rose over the battlefield, it burned off the mist in which Marshal Soult's French corps was hidden, thus allowing Napoleon to assault the Pratzen Heights at precisely the right psychological moment. As diving expeditions have repeatedly shown, only a handful of men and one cannon fell through any ice. The truth is far more interesting, and indicative of Napoleon's genius, than Ridley Scott's caricature.

Hollywood's disregard for historical truth was once summed up in the clerihew:

Ceil B. DeMille,
Rather against his will,
Was persuaded to leave Moses
Out of The Wars of the Roses.

But at least DeMille's movies had crisp, quotable dialogue: The screenplay of this movie, by contrast, says more about the argot of 2020s Hollywood than it does about the repartee of the Napoleonic court.

Napoleon was a genuinely witty man, constantly making jokes that are funny even today. By contrast, Joaquin Phoenix never says anything amusing, except unconsciously, as in the lines: “Destiny has brought me this lamb chop,” and “They want me to abdicate? Fine, I’ll abdicate!” When the Russians burn down the Kremlin, he says, “It's not very sporting, is it?” When he quarrels with Lord Whitworth, the British ambassador to Paris, Phoenix is given the line, “You think you're so great because you have boats!”

There are so many ways that even so much as a nod at the truth would have improved this film, and historical consultants are inexpensive to hire. Instead of showing Napoleon (incorrectly) as being present at Marie Antoinette's execution, Scott could have depicted the genuine occasion when Napoleon saw the decapitated head of her lady-in-waiting paraded outside his hotel window on a pole. Instead of claiming Napoleon entered Toulon as a spy before its capture, he could have explained the brilliant strategy by which he expelled the Royal Navy from the port (which was not done with heated cannonballs, as we see here). Napoleon was wounded in the leg by a pike at Toulon, but Scott ignores this in order to invent a scene in which Phoenix pulls a cannonball out of his horse's carcass with his bare hands.

In the scene covering the Brumaire coup of November 1799, Scott has soldiers leveling muskets at senators, which did not happen—and thereby misses the opportunity to show those senators in their red cloaks jumping through the windows of the Orangerie to escape arrest. Scott weirdly has Napoleon's mother meet Josephine for the first time in 1799, despite Napoleon having married Josephine three years earlier. (Napoleon's mother for some reason calls him "Emperor.") In a court that was in real life criticized for its formality and pomposity, Phoenix is depicted pulling Vanessa Kirby under the dining table for sex on the marble floor in a room full of servants, and years later slapping her in the face in public during their divorce ceremony.

The battle of Waterloo looks magnificent but is laughably inaccurate. Cannonballs did not explode on impact like ordnance shells in the First World War. They were solid iron with no explosive inside. Nor were there 25 British squares formed during the battle, but 13. There was no heavy downpour of rain on the morning of the battle of Waterloo; that was the day before. A marksman did not offer to the Duke of Wellington to shoot Napoleon as he was well out of range; that was a cannoner. Nor did the same man later blow a two-inch-square hole in Napoleon's hat.

Nearly a century after he made his Napoleon epic, Abel Gance's crown remains intact, and all because Ridley Scott despises what he calls “—ing historians” who he says don’t know what happened regarding Napoleon, because “they weren't there.”

Yes. We do.
Moyn v. World

Liberalism Against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Times
By Samuel Moyn
Yale University Press, 240 pages

Reviewed by Tod Lindberg

Samuel Moyn was born in 1972, which was, in its way, perfect timing. There can be no doubting his youthful precocity; his writing bears traces of it to this day. But even a precocious child of the 1970s and ’80s couldn’t have had much in the way of direct contact with the social and political upheaval that gripped the United States and the West in the 1960s and 1970s—to say nothing of the real-time controversies and choices in the aftermath of the Second World War.

The world emerged from that war horrified not only by its devastation but also by the stark realization of just how awful were the possibilities of man’s inhumanity to man. True, the right side won. But the war itself, the Holocaust, the rapid dissolution of a wartime alliance with the Soviet Union into a Cold War in which the Soviet side pursued a totalitarian form of global ideological and political dominance—all this left serious people wondering whether the horror of mid-20th-century Europe was past, or merely prologue to something worse. The Soviet Union, having established its dominance in Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the war, sent dissidents to the Gulag at home, smashed an uprising in Hungary in 1956, put missiles in Cuba in 1962, and crushed the Prague Spring in 1968.

Moyn, now the Chancellor Kent Professor of Law and History at Yale University, knows this history—as history. But he was about seven years old when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, the Marxist Sandinistas came to power in Nicaragua, and the revolutionary regime of Ayatollah Khomeini took American diplomats hostage in Iran. Did he get to stay up late in the last year of the Carter administration to watch ABC’s America Held Hostage at 11:30 Eastern? I don’t know. What I do know is that by the time Moyn got to college, the Berlin Wall had fallen. And by the time he graduated, Germany was reunified—a geopolitical fact that troubled the sleep only of those on the Soviet side of the wartime alliance that had defeated German fascism less than half a century before. Also during Moyn’s college years, the Warsaw Pact dissolved, the Soviet Union broke up, and the Baltic states and Ukraine (among other former Soviet Socialist Republics) became independent.

Now, if you lived through much or any of what transpired en route to the amazing collapse of the Soviet Union, you might have said something along the lines of “Whew, close call.” Or even, “Thank God.” But if, like the Chancellor Kent Professor of Law and History at Yale University, you missed all that and only read about it later, you can simply take as a given the victory of freedom, democracy, the West, whatever. That’s what happened, after all. And without a glimmer of gratitude or even apparent awareness of what you’re doing, you can move on to your self-admiring exoration of the supposed intellectual and moral failings of those who took the side of freedom, democracy, the West, whatever.

Liberalism Against Itself, Moyn’s new book, presents the story of how a group of intellectuals—the “Cold War liberals”—struggled to grasp the situation of the world in the two decades after the Second World War and ended up betraying liberalism and the principles of the Enlightenment in a way that fundamentally narrowed the vision of and ambition for human political action in pursuit of progress.

In Moyn’s estimation, Enlightenment-inspired liberalism has yet to recover from this Cold War betrayal and may never do so. Nor does liberalism necessarily deserve to recover, such were the hideous and unnecessary transfigurations the Cold War liberals wrought. All this took place, by the way, even before the Cold War liberal tendency split and “collapsed” into what Moyn views as the sibling depravities of neoliberalism and neoconservatism. The only real hope is that a new generation of thinkers (oh, I see Samuel Moyn has his hand up) will repudiate the narrow vision of Cold War liberalism and attach us to the Enlightenment’s radical faith in human possibility via politics.

Moyn is well-read. But he is less interested in understanding the thinkers he analyzes than in prosecuting the case against them—or rather, against the Weberian “ideal type,” the “Cold War liberal,” he has dragooned them into representing. Many elements of this ideal type will be familiar to anyone with even passing acquaintance with what intellectuals were arguing about in the postwar period. Yes, it is true, many
of the thinkers of the day developed a deep antipathy toward collectivism and a regard for individual liberty as the best of the liberal tradition. Yes, among the Cold War liberals, there developed a philosophical “anti-can-on” that generally began with Rousseau and extended through Hegel and Marx into its real-world manifestation in Soviet Communism and, especially, Stalinism.

Yes, the Nazi regime, though drawing on different sources as well, did have “totalitarianism” in common with the Soviet Union. Yes, the preservation of individual liberty against the danger of this totalitarianism looked to be Job One. Yes, the United States was the locus of resistance. And yes, the Cold War liberals saw this as a struggle between good and evil.

They rejected (though I think it’s fair to say they nevertheless feared) the historicist claim that Communism was the inevitable victor in the contest with democratic capitalism or democratic socialism—more broadly between totalitarianism and the “Free World.” They also rejected the relativist tendency of the strain of historicism incapable of drawing a distinction between good and bad in politics. The West, they believed, really was worth preserving on the merits. And they rejected the view that the human being was perfectible through political or any other means. On the question of whether the human was permanently and inescapably dark, they differed. But they had in mind, above all, preserving whatever good there is in the human.

The Cold War liberals, like every generation of intellectuals before or since, also had the intellectual fashions of their times to contend with, as well as ample personal vanities generally stemming from the conviction, not wrong, that they were smarter than everybody else. Moyn pretty much has the same bias in his own favor, which is not supported by the text he has produced. Indeed, Liberalism Against Itself is a shambles in many, many ways—literary, intellectual, political, and especially moral. It’s organized into chapters featuring the names of (I presume) Moyn’s eccentric short list of leading Cold War liberals: Judith Shklar, Isaiah Berlin, Karl Popper, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Hannah Arendt, and Lionel Trilling. In the hands of a deft writer, this approach of connected intellectual profiles can work well—it does in Mark Lilla’s The Reckless Mind, for example. But here, why he chooses these six and not others is murky, and Moyn’s consideration of them spills from chapter to chapter often seemingly on the basis of when something pops into his head. I have edited numerous books, and at around page 25, I found myself grumbling about what a shame it is that nobody edits books anymore. By page 50, I was struck with the harrowing thought that the published version of the book appears after, not absent, heavy editing.

He is a scrutineer of ephemera par excellence. Does it really matter that Hannah Arendt may never have read Judith Shklar’s After Utopia, something Moyn deduces because Arendt’s library contained a copy of the book with no handwritten notations? He includes a reproduction of the typescript contents page of Shklar’s doctoral dissertation, for example. He does so, I think, in an effort to vivify his discussion of how the structure of her dissertation changed from its submission to its publication as After Utopia. There is a kind of filial piety here with regard to Shklar, but in the case of all those subject to his criticism, his scrutiny seems so small-minded that it all but rehabilitates their weaknesses. By the time Moyn is done attacking Lionel Trilling for his embrace of Freud’s dark view of human nature, for example, I was almost ready to give Civilization and Its Discontents a fresh hearing.

But the infamia Moyn pronounces on the Cold War liberals is not, in the main, related to the trivialities that manage to bog down a book of merely 170 pages plus notes and index. Moyn’s indictment is that their fear of the collectivism of Soviet Communism was so exaggerated that they were willing to abandon and attack the more ambitious Enlightenment project of human perfectibility through political action in favor of acquiescence to and defense of an American and Western individualist status quo shot through with injustice.

Let me reframe, as the structuralists say. What this book actually argues, though its author does not know it or want it to be so, is that the Cold War liberals grasped the
most pressing moral problem and political challenge of their lifetime with unwavering clarity. They understood that Communism, like Nazism, was evil, and that freedom, which starts with individual liberty, is good in itself, but fragile. They recognized that the ambition on the other side was total—that is, totalitarian—and in hot pursuit of global victory, both ideologically and politically. They sought to thwart this victory as best they could in their area of comparative advantage, the life of the mind. They did so in part by defending the values of individual liberty embodied in the United States and the West but not the Soviet bloc.

Most of them recognized that the actualization of liberty in the West was incomplete, but that its opponents were out to crush it in its entirety. They argued all this out among their intellectual peers while such characters as Dean Acheson and John Foster Dulles were busy elsewhere. And they did all this without knowing whether freedom would persist in the West against a permanent adversary (the optimistic view) or would fall to decadence and a radical onslaught at home or in a nuclear Holocaust.

But Moyn knows how the Cold War turned out, and to him, the outcome seems so obvious that everybody at the time should have been able to see it coming. Facing down an opponent bent on remaking politics into a collectivist enterprise under, say, Stalin’s dictatorship, why stick to a defense of individual liberty against the collective when you could embrace a more positive Rousseauian project of collectively removing the chains in which the human birthright finds itself?

Moyn can imagine no intellectually or morally satisfactory answer to this question. His foray into the writings of his subjects is for the purpose of framing the inadequacy of their stance, not to understand it. Yet there is an answer common to his subjects, one that makes sense in their times and ours. It’s that freedom is often first on the chopping block among those who presume to know and speak in the name of the “general will.” The intellectuals of Cold War liberalism got that right, and their greatest legacy ought to be an awareness of the need to preserve individual freedom while pursuing political improvement, lest the “improvement” take an oppressive, totalitarian, or even genocidal turn. Whatever they got wrong, they were right about that.

A Russian invasion of Ukraine and a Hamas massacre in Israel perhaps serve as a reminder, to those born too late for the last round, that the defense of freedom under attack is a permanent political challenge. Anything resembling progress in politics is contingent on human beings, including intellectuals, rising to the occasion. Surely this should not be beyond the grasp or beneath the amour propre of the Chancellor Kent Professor of Law and History at Yale University.

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Friedman’s Choice

The Death of Public School: How Conservatives Won the War Over Education in America
By Cara Fitzpatrick
Basic Books, 384 pages

Reviewed by Michael A. Woronoff

In 1955, economics Nobel laureate Milton Friedman published his seminal essay “The Role of Government in Education,” presenting for the first time his proposal to replace the existing system of government-run schools with a voucher program. Friedman believed his school-choice plan represented a more efficient arrangement that would improve academic outcomes while providing families increased autonomy to decide where and how to educate their children.

Friedman did not oppose all government involvement in education. He recognized that the benefits of education flow beyond the student, and that society has an interest in ensuring its citizens have a common set of values and a minimum degree of literacy and knowledge. To Friedman, this “network effect” provides the state sufficient justification to set minimum educational standards and assume the cost of schooling its citizens.

While recognizing the economic case for government subsidy of education, Friedman saw no reason the state should be in the business of running schools. On the contrary, he argued that the prevailing practice of widespread government-controlled schools harmed educational results and impinged on parental liberty. He reasoned that the competition

Commentary

41
The problem with Fitzpatrick’s title is the problem with her book—she has a view to convey, and she doesn’t let facts impede her presentation of that view. It’s a shame, because she offers a good, though incomplete, history.

Fitzpatrick’s report of the death of public education seems greatly exaggerated. So, to paraphrase Mark Twain, Friedman’s essay continues to play a significant role in shaping the school-choice debate. It features prominently in Cara Fitzpatrick’s new book, The Death of Public School: How Conservatives Won the War Over Education in America, a history of the ups and downs of the school-choice movement over the past 70 years.

The title of Fitzpatrick’s work is misleading. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), at the time Friedman published his essay, approximately 85 percent of all K–12 children in the U.S. attended public schools. In 2021, the most recent year for which the NCES provides data, this figure had risen to approximately 90 percent, around 85 percent if you classify charter schools as private. So, to paraphrase Mark Twain, Fitzpatrick’s report of the death of public education seems greatly exaggerated.

The problem with Fitzpatrick’s title is the problem with her book—she has a view she wants to convey, and she doesn’t let facts impede her presentation of that view. It’s a shame, because there is a good, though incomplete, history of the fight over school choice in the book. But she leaves out the parts of the story that are inconvenient to her worldview, includes debunked theories to support her thesis, and misinterprets many of the facts she conveys.

Early in her book, Fitzpatrick declares: “The war over school choice has been the fiercest of this country’s education battles because it is the most important: it is the struggle over the definition of public education.” Fitzpatrick thinks this is the crucial fight: whether to include in the definition of public education schools that are government-financed but run by others. She frames the debate this way because she believes the argument is about values, rather than outcomes—with most Democrats lining up behind government-run schools “and most Republicans arguing for greater ‘freedom’ for families.” (The scare quotes are in the original, though it’s unclear why.)

But that’s not exactly right, is it? Most people do care about this outcome: whether all students in the U.S. have an equal opportunity to receive a quality education in a safe environment. The battle is fierce because, on this basis, traditional public schools have been doing a poor job for quite some time and the public knows it.

According to Gallup, in 1973, confidence in U.S. public schools hovered around 60 percent for both Democrats and Republicans. In 2019, before the effects of the Covid pandemic, this percentage had dropped in half, to around 30 percent for both groups. The decline in confidence occurred even though education spending (adjusted for inflation) more than doubled over that period. Today, the United States spends around $800 billion annually on public K–12 education, averaging more than $16,000 per K–12 student, among the top five of developed nations. Despite this level of spending, the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress reports that three out of four eighth-graders in the U.S. are not proficient in math. Over two out of three are not proficient in reading. Fourth-graders showed similar results. The Wall Street Journal recently reported that the average ACT score for the Class of 2023 suffered its sixth consecutive decline, dropping to a new 30-year low.

Faced with these alarming facts, one might assume that our elected officials would insist public schools do a better job of educating our K–12 students. Or they could go the other way, as Oregon did in late October, suspending high school graduation requirements for math, reading, and writing proficiency until the 2027–28 school year. It’s hard to see how awarding diplomas for time served will either halt the slide in public confidence or improve educational outcomes.

Fitzpatrick suggests that the modern school-choice movement is contaminated by segregationist roots and, as a result, is an unacceptable alternative to government-run schools. This is also the view of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president, Randi Weingarten, who has called school-choice programs the “only slightly more polite cousins of segregation” and likened parents who seek
alternatives to traditional public schools to segregationists.

According to this “racist origin” view, the modern school-choice movement arose in response to the landmark 1954 case of Brown v. Board of Education. In Brown, the Supreme Court unanimously outlawed mandated segregation in public schools. Attempting to skirt this ruling, a small number of Southern states shut down public schools and provided white families tuition grants to enable them to send their children to private, racially segregated schools. Proponents of this view argue that modern school-choice programs are racist because, in the words of the Center for American Progress, “the impacts of these programs in the South still reverberate today.”

There are two issues with this argument. First, the idea of school choice preceded the Brown decision by at least a century. Its intellectual antecedents can be traced to the works of Adam Smith, Thomas Paine, and John Stuart Mill. Vermont adopted a school-choice program in 1869. Maine adopted one in 1873.

Friedman, who published his article a year after Brown, said he developed his ideas with no knowledge of the segregationist interest in school choice, and that he was absolutely opposed to forced segregation. There is no reason to believe he was being insincere. Fitzpatrick acknowledges that Friedman’s views were “consistent with his own long-held principles,” rather than racially motivated.

In any event, the programs that were devised by the segregationists were not true school-choice programs. As Fitzpatrick observes, the schemes adopted to circumvent Brown were race-neutral on paper but, in practice, made available only to white families. Friedman himself proposed a universal voucher program, available to all K–12 students, regardless of race, gender, or financial circumstances. He predicted his program would result in increased integration as it freed individuals from the shackles of government-mandated segregation. According to EdChoice, Friedman’s prediction was accurate, with “nearly every empirical study on the topic [determining] school vouchers lead to more ethnic and racial integration in schools.”

Finally, the segregationist-developed schemes never took hold, dying out long before widespread adoption of modern-day school-choice programs. Vouchers did not gain prominence in the U.S. until 1990, with the implementation of the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program. As Fitzpatrick acknowledges, school-choice pioneer Polly Williams—a black woman and Democrat—was a driving force behind this trailblazing program. As late as 1995, fewer than 1,000 students through-out the U.S. were taking advantage of school-choice programs. That number did not exceed 100,000 until 2005.

The second issue with the “racist origin” argument is that it relies on a classic fallacy—judging the value of the idea based on its supposed history rather than on its merits and the supporting evidence. It would be ludicrous to deny the causal link between smoking and cancer just because the connection was first discovered by Nazi scientists. Similarly, school-choice programs should be judged on their ability to achieve desired results, not on their historical lineage.

And on this basis, a growing body of research reveals that government-funded school-choice programs have been an overwhelming success. Contrary to Fitzpatrick’s implication that the studies are inconclusive, the data confirm that school-choice programs improve academic outcomes for both program participants and those who remain in public schools, save the public money, and reduce segregation.

According to a 2023 report, 84 percent of the 187 empirical studies reviewed by EdChoice found school-choice programs to have positive effects on a wide variety of criteria, including test scores, graduation rates, parental satisfaction, civic values, racial and ethnic integration, fiscal effects, and school safety. The most recent meta-analysis, conducted at the University of Arkansas, reported that students using school vouchers “saw large positive gains on test scores that equate roughly to 49 more days of learning in math and 28 more days of learning in reading and English.”

In the introduction to her book, Fitzpatrick contends that conservatives strategically adopted civil-rights language as a means to attack government-run public schools. As
an example, she points to Betsy DeVos, former secretary of education, who called the education system “institutionally racist against blacks and other minorities [, trapping] them in failing schools and with no possibility of escape.” Fitzpatrick suggests this strategy was cynical, that conservatives merely feigned concern for civil rights, and that DeVos insincerely asserted systemic bias in pursuit of her true goal. But this suggestion is unfair.

According to the U.S. Treasury, despite the end of legal segregation seven decades ago, “many of America’s public schools remain segregated by race and ethnicity” and “substantial racial disparities in educational opportunity and attainment still exist.” These disparities take the form of significant gaps in, among other things, reading and math achievement, access to advanced placement and other college-ready courses, and high-school graduation rates. The pandemic magnified these effects, with students in high-poverty schools experiencing larger pandemic-related achievement declines, increasing the achievement gap.

This is why K–12 education equity is the civil-rights issue of our time. A decent K–12 education is the path out of poverty for the disadvantaged. Forcing students to attend poorly run public schools when a better alternative is available is cold-hearted and inhumane. Fitzpatrick appears at one point to acknowledge the validity of this claim, declaring, “Many of the arguments for school choice are compelling . . . because of long-standing inequities in public education.”

In light of this, Fitzpatrick’s observation that most Democrats put values above outcomes and oppose school choice is incomprehensible. Why would anyone deprive disadvantaged students of access to a quality education that is unavailable through their local government-run schools? It’s simply not credible to claim that public schools can be fixed when they’ve been broken for 70 years.

Fitzpatrick sprinkles clues to answer this mystery throughout her book. She identifies several leading figures on the left and bipartisan coalitions that have supported some form of school choice, indicating that Democrats’ opposition to these programs is not nearly as monolithic as she asserts. This June, RealClear Opinion Research reported that 66 percent of Democrats polled support school choice.

More telling, Fitzpatrick observes that, in the battle over school choice, “the leadership of the Democratic Party and one of its historical allies, the teacher’s unions, often . . . lined up against a core constituency: Black and Latino parents.” RealClear Opinion Research confirms the observation, reporting that 73 percent of black and 71 percent of Hispanic voters support school choice.

The role of teachers’ unions is key to understanding Democrats’ historic opposition to school choice. Fitzpatrick barely covers it. Although she mentions a few instances in which teachers’ unions legally challenged or lobbied against individual school-choice programs, she overlooks the systematic efforts of the teachers’ unions to prevent or delay the adoption of school-choice plans.

It’s no surprise that teachers’ unions oppose school-choice programs. Although they argue school choice results in a reduction of funds for public schools—particularly poorly performing schools, which need the money the most—this argument seems disingenuous. The purpose of government funding is to educate children, not to prop up failing schools. Moreover, in reality, public schools benefit financially when students leave to take advantage of school-choice programs. Only a portion of the money public schools receive is based on enrollment counts. As a result, declining enrollment results in a higher dollar amount per pupil who remains.

It is more likely unions oppose school choice because it threatens their monopoly on public education, resulting in fewer union jobs, lower union dues, and higher competition for unions and their members. And that opposition is fierce. The unions marshal enormous resources to combat school choice, funneling almost all of these resources to Democrats.

The National Education Association (NEA) and the AFT are two of the largest labor unions in the country. During 2020–21, the NEA gave approximately $180 million in direct and indirect political donations. This amounted to $2 spent on politics for every $1 spent on member services. The AFT donated an additional $55 million. The two unions regularly are, or near, the top of the list of interest-group contributors at both the state and federal level.

Well over 95 percent of the donations from these two unions go to Democrats. In addition, members of the unions regularly are 10 percent or more of the delegates at the Democratic National Convention, making them the single largest organizational bloc of Democratic Party activists. Is it any wonder that Democratic politicians support the teachers’ unions’ agenda at the expense of some of the party’s core constituencies?

Though Fitzpatrick’s declaration that conservatives have won the war is premature, cause for hope does exist. But Fitzpatrick has it backward. Teachers’ unions, not conservative activists, deserve most of the credit.

From very early in the pandemic, Randi Weingarten, president of the AFT, was a powerful proponent of
school shutdowns, both publicly and behind the scenes. She was effective, too. Well into 2021, long after the potential harms to students were known and the dangers of Covid had passed, the AFT and its allies kept many public schools closed, particularly those in left-leaning cities with strong teachers’ unions. Students stuck in these schools suffered the consequences, including severe learning loss and increased incidence of depression. The effects were magnified for low-income, black, and Latino children. Meanwhile, private schools fought to reopen, and by October 2020, 90 percent of private schools offered in-person instruction. After the fact, Weingarten tried to gaslight the public, claiming she had never championed shutdowns, but rather spent her energy trying to get schools to reopen. Her claim was laughable.

The teachers’ unions also leveraged the pandemic and conversations around reopening to push for broad progressive policy changes, including suspension of teacher-performance evaluations, a limit on student testing, cancellation of student-loan debt, Medicare for all, a wealth tax, defunding the police, and banning charter schools. Ordinary parents had difficulty seeing how any of these proposals could possibly improve their children’s education in any manner.

In the meantime, remote learning offered parents the opportunity to observe what their children were being taught. Many were unhappy with what they viewed to be ideological indoctrination, leading them to demand more say in their children’s schooling. Tone-deaf to their desires, in a September 2021 Virginia gubernatorial debate, Democratic nominee Terry McAuliffe declared, “I don’t think parents should be telling schools what they should teach.” Shortly thereafter, Weingarten tweeted her appreciation of a piece in the Washington Post declaring, “Parents claim they have the right to shape their kids’ school curriculum. They don’t.” Many parents did not appreciate the deep faith in statism these statements conveyed.

These developments led to a powerful backlash, which served as rocket fuel to the school-choice movement. According to EdChoice, in 2023 alone, seven states enacted new private choice programs. Ten other states expanded their existing programs. There are now 77 educational choice programs in 32 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. After the most recent expansions, approximately 36 percent of students in the U.S. are eligible for a private choice program, a 60 percent increase in access to private choice over the past two years alone.

So, it turns out, the heavy-handed tactics of the teachers’ unions during the pandemic did more to advance school choice than conservatives were able to accomplish during the almost 70 years following publication of Friedman’s essay. Irony abounds.

*Liel Leibovitz’s Talmud*

How the Talmud Can Change Your Life: Surprisingly Modern Advice from a Very Old Book

By Liel Leibovitz

WW. Norton & Company, 272 pages

Reviewed by David Wolpe

LITTLE BOOKS are often made from larger ones. Lamb’s tales from Shakespeare taught a generation the narratives of Shakespeare before they were ready to tackle the language. Lots of simplified pebbles were hewn from the boulder of Gibbon’s history of Rome. But no vast series of tomes has been more boiled, digested, excerpted, and explained than the Talmud. For the study of the Talmud is the work of a lifetime and the reading of a book the work of a week.

Some have chosen the way of Reader’s Digest: Montefiore and Loewe in their Rabbinic Anthology and Cohen in his Everyman’s Talmud offer a series of Talmudic teachings with a lot of the awkwardness smoothed over and things they considered no longer relevant omitted. Other scholars, such as Solomon Schechter, tried to portray the theology and worldview of the rabbis based on Talmudic learning.

In our own age, with the avalanche of self-help books, when everyone from Marcus Aurelius to Proust can tell you how to live your life more productively, can the Talmud’s timeless wisdom not be abbreviated and harnessed to the same end?

Behold the explainer for the age: How the Talmud Can Change Your Life, by Tablet’s Liel Leibovitz. This is a more learned and, in some ways, more serious book than its title might suggest. Though written

Commentary
with a light touch and easily read, it does in fact explore deep themes in the Talmud and in life.

The Talmud famously preserves arguments. If you ask why, Liel Leibovitz has an answer that reveals his approach:

The rabbis chose to record their arguments because they understood a few profound truths about human nature: that change was as terrifying as it was inevitable; that people have a tendency to think of history as a positive linear progression and are therefore likely to view the latest development as necessarily optimal; that the human urge to break rules is just as mighty and eternal as the need for boundaries; and that when all that we know and love and believe comes tumbling down, our first and most disastrous instinct is often to abandon all hope.

There is a great deal of wisdom in that paragraph, and it is distilled from a story about a rabbi who “really loved prostitutes.” The flavor of high and low is sustained throughout the book. Leibovitz will keep you reading and along the way, like a maggid, a storytelling preacher, the author has rounded up stories outside of the Talmud to teach us what the Talmud itself has to say about our lives.

I suspect that few prior books on the subject tell us much about the beginnings of Billie Holiday’s career or the depredations of the founder of the Dewey Decimal System (who apparently was a first-class no-goodnik). One of Leibovitz’s charms is that of the petichtah—the ancient means of preaching whereby you begin in one place (usually with a verse), cover vast territory as though traversing the sea, and then swoop back to show how the original verse is seen in a new light. Leibovitz will begin with, say, the story of Soviet secret agent Aldrich Ames, who (I think it is fair to say) has never before been linked with the sages Ravina and Rav Ashi. Yet Leibovitz ties them all together in pursuit of a significant lesson of life, the way in which we can and sometimes should disappear into stories larger than ourselves.

In a moving epilogue, Leibovitz talks about a major health crisis in his own life that led him back to the Talmud. The reader has felt throughout the book that this is more than an academic project and discovers the beginning of it at the end of the work. I would quote “in my beginning is my end” except that it is from another well-known no-goodnik.

Much of the Talmud is taken up with the minutiae of life. To be honest, much of it isn’t even the minutiae of life as it exists now, since ceremonies in the Temple or agricultural laws do not apply in a literal sense to our lives in this century, especially in the Diaspora. In some ways, studying the Talmud is a lot like the hand exercises one does on the way to piano mastery. They seem inexplicable in themselves but later you see how indispensable they are to the entire enterprise, and along the way you hear some unexpectedly beautiful music.

The danger is that when you are surrounded by so many details, it’s hard to step back and understand the grand sweep. Leibovitz not only retells the stories of the Talmud (and many other stories as well) with a deft touch but offers a poignant lesson that rises from the text and seeps into self-awareness.

I cannot omit noting that I was reading this book when October 7 struck. And a single line illustrates its wisdom and relevance. In a passage about memoirs of the Nazis, Leibovitz notes: “Grief was a communal challenge, not an individual crisis.” How true that was and is. How perfect for the moment. How necessary and wise the book that offers it.
CONTINUED FROM PAGE 48

And not just “issues” but Issues! The show was a weekly donnybrook between Archie, the hardworking reactionary breadwinner, and his hippie left-wing son-in-law, the perpetual graduate student. In between there were visits from draft dodgers, the Jewish Defense League, female impersonators, and a buddy of Archie’s who it turned out was a closeted gay man. Oh, and also, Edith Bunker, Archie’s long-suffering sweet-natured wife, got sexually assaulted.

Big stuff, in other words. And often terrifically funny. All in the Family was a preachy, left-wing agitprop comedy that really worked. I’m not sure it convinced Americans to vote a certain way—Nixon won a landslide victory in 1972, and eight years later, Ronald Reagan took the White House for eight glorious years—but it was an indelible snapshot of a country coming to grips with massive change, seen through the American working-class living room.

Lear’s first big spin-off of the show was The Jeffersons, which followed the Bunker’s former neighbors, George and Louise Jefferson, as they prospered and moved from Queens to…and do I really need to say it? To a dee-luxe apartment in the sky-high-high.

Georgie Jefferson burst into the All in the Family cinematic universe as Archie’s black neighbor—just as bigoted and small-minded as he was—with a crucial difference. George Jefferson got rich. He and his wife Louise (Weezie! Don’t tell me you don’t remember that!) moved into Manhattan in 1975, and while the show occasionally dealt with social issues, like alcoholism and adult illiteracy, it was really about a working-class guy with a chip on his shoulder who made good. The show ran 10 years and spent a good part of that time coming to grips with}

The great legacy of Norman Lear isn’t really apparent if you watch the reruns. They often seem heavy and dated, artifacts of a distant time. There are still big laughs in every one of his comedies, especially The Jeffersons, and even though it enraged my orthodontist and his assistant, there was something revolutionary about a woman on a television comedy directly addressing the fear of getting older. Even when the world was simmering down, Norman Lear kept taking big swings for the fence. When the American dining room was a place of arguments and discord, he gave us All in the Family. When the culture got a little too into itself and navel-gazing, he gave us Ann Romano’s second-act monologue. When it turned to prosperity and Reaganism, he gave us George Jefferson.

In other words, he kept trying to capture what was actually going on in America—he felt like that was the whole point of television, in fact. And he was maybe the last television writer and producer who believed that. Which is why his loss will be hard to get over.

Commentary
ALMOST EXACTLY 46 years ago—December 1977—I was 12 years old, in the orthodontist's chair, getting my mouth fitted for a retainer that I had already decided I would never wear. But I sat there in dutiful obedience as the orthodontist and her assistant made a plaster cast of the inside of my mouth and complained to each other about the previous night's episode of the sitcom One Day at a Time.

For those of you under 45, One Day at a Time was a television comedy that ran from 1975 to 1984 and centered around the lives of a single, divorced mother, played by Bonnie Franklin, and her two vaguely teenage daughters, played by Mackenzie Phillips and Valerie Bertinelli. The show was produced and developed by the legendary television impresario Norman Lear, who died in early December 2023, and like most of his shows, it was a huge hit.

It also, like most of his shows, touched on American cultural divisions, changing morals and sexual standards, and depicted the characters digesting the tumultuous decade or so of upheaval that had preceded it. Ann Romano, Bonnie Franklin's character, was an outspoken feminist career woman trying to raise her daughters in a post–Women's Lib world.

But the episode that really irritated my orthodontist and her assistant didn't grapple with any of the big issues that beset Americans in 1977. It wasn't about abortion or gay rights or Vietnam veterans or the gas shortage or nuclear power. The episode was titled “Ann's Crisis,” and it was mostly about Ann Romano freaking out because she had just turned 36.

And it wasn't really played for laughs. A good part of the second act was a long solo scene in which Ann Romano meditated on getting older, being a woman of a certain age (36!), and losing her looks. It was a stagey, melodramatic monologue—not unusual, to be honest, for a Norman Lear production—and it really ticked off my orthodontist and her assistant who, I probably don't need to say, were a few years past 36.

I mean, I think. I was 12, so everyone to me was ancient. But, boy, did it make them furious. And for some reason, when I heard the news of Norman Lear's death, my mind instantly cast back to that moment, with my mouth full of plaster and two older-than-36 women—career women, just like Ann Romano—telling each other that they would never watch that show again.

They probably did, though. One Day at a Time ran for another seven years. At one point in the 1970s, Norman Lear was responsible for a half-dozen of television's biggest hit comedies, among them The Jeffersons, Good Times, Maude, One Day at a Time, Sanford and Son, and the show that formed the foundation of his empire, All in the Family. His stratospheric career tells the story of 15 years of American history, an era of political volatility and Day-Glo weirdness, and even though he was an old-line liberal and establishment Democrat, he managed to capture a lot of American culture in his body of work.

Say this for Norman Lear: He didn't live, or work, in an ideological bubble. His characters came from all parts of the American experience.

All in the Family premiered in 1970, when the streets were still full of tear gas and there were 334,600 American troops in Vietnam. It introduced Americans to an enduring cultural icon, Archie Bunker, who spoke a blunt, bigoted language that made sense to a lot of Americans who were punch-drunk from the culture wars (and real wars) of the 1960s. The show was topical, profane, often hilarious—it took its inspiration from the bitter arguments around the family dinner table—and no one fretted about turning 36. There were bigger issues to write scripts about.

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

Rob Long has been the executive producer of seven TV series.
Hatred of Jews Erupts in Full Fury

Following the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust, antisemites mount a series of vicious attacks, threats and 5 malicious Big Lies against Jews and Israel

With no shame or sign of humanity, the enemies of Israel have doubled down on their insistence that Israel is an illegitimate state that must be destroyed and that the savage slaughter of 1,200 innocent Jews was justified—all based on five “Big Lies” about the Jewish state.

What are the facts?

The world for Jews and Israel will never be the same. Wellesley College students receive official messages saying Zionists (i.e. most Jewish students) are not welcome in school dorms. Hamas official Ghazi Hamad, in a TV rant, swears Hamas will repeat October 7 until Israel is annihilated. West Bank Palestinian activist Ahed Tamimi says “What Hitler did to you was a joke—we will drink your blood and eat your skull.”

While Hamas’s October 7 atrocity caused many Palestinian supporters to rethink their positions, the event only ignited an explosion of hate from Israel’s enemies. Tens of thousands of demonstrators demanded not two states living in peace, but rather, “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free . . . by any means necessary”—meaning, clearly, slaughter of civilians.

Power of Big Lies: Though Israel was the victim of a mass murder of innocent Jews, its enemies blame the Jewish state—not only for the Hamas massacre, but also for responding in defense. The reasons many blame Israel for the atrocity are based on five Big Lies. Big Lies were used by Nazi leader Goebbels, who noted that if he told an outrageous lie often enough, people would begin to believe it. Alternatively, if you use truth as a basis for your judgments, you may find these facts useful:

Lie #1: Israel is a colonial state that stole Palestinian land. A colonizer is a foreign nation that conquers and exploits another nation. First, the Palestinians have never owned any land in Palestine. They were also never a nation. Nothing was stolen. Second, Jews are the indigenous people of the land of Israel. They have lived there continuously for 3,000 years and had two commonwealths for over 1,000 years: They are not foreigners. No colonial state.

Lie #2: Israel commits genocide. Genocide is the intent to destroy a national, ethnic, racial or religious group by killing its members. Israel does not, nor has ever, targeted innocent Palestinian civilians for attacks—no mass murders, no pogroms. All Palestinian civilian deaths have occurred as collateral damage while fighting terrorists who hide in residential or other public areas. Tellingly, the Palestinian population in and around Israel has mushroomed since Israel’s founding in 1948—from about 700,000 to seven million today: No genocide.

Lie #3: Israel practices apartheid. Apartheid is a system of legalized racial segregation in which one racial group is deprived of political and civil rights. Israel has no laws or policies separating or limiting the rights of any of its citizens—including two million Arab-Israeli citizens—nor any Palestinians outside Israel. Political and civil rights of all Palestinians outside Israel are controlled by their respective dictatorships, who allow virtually no freedoms, such as speech or the vote. No apartheid.

Lie #4: Israel is committing war crimes. War crimes include torture, hostage taking, acts of terrorism, rape and intentional targeting of civilians. While Hamas committed all these acts on October 7, Israel commits none. Though some media bristle at what they consider excessive civilian deaths during Israeli military efforts, in fact, Israel attacks only military structures and personnel—never civilian-only targets. Hamas places its fighters in dense residential areas or in tunnels beneath them, endangering civilians. No Israeli war crimes.

Lie #5: Israel oppresses the Palestinians. Oppression is the malicious exercise of power to discriminate against some groups. Because Israel completely exited Gaza in 2005, it has no power over the daily lives of Gazans. However, because of Hamas’s continuous terror, especially efforts to kill Jews and destroy the Jewish state, Israel and Egypt blockaded Gaza to prevent terror attacks. Likewise, under the Oslo Accords, Israel and the Palestinian Authority share governance of Judea and Samaria (the West Bank), and Israel plays virtually no role governing Palestinians’ daily lives. It enters Palestinian-controlled areas only when terrorists flee to and hide in them. No Israeli oppression.

Above all, Israel and the U.N. have made numerous offers of land for an independent Palestinian state. Tragically, the Palestinians have turned down five offers of land for peace since 1948, three since the year 2000. Apparently, their dream of conquering Israel “from the land to the sea” has greater importance.

The bestiality of the October 7 massacre shocked us—beheadings, incineration, rape, torture, heartless executions, brutal kidnappings. Even worse, the gates have opened to unlimited Jew hatred on American streets and campuses—to condoning savagery with the excuse of Palestinian liberation . . . based on utter lies about the Jewish state. But Hamas and the haters should know that “Never Again” means fighting and defeating evil forever.

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