Commentary

MAY 2018

Israel: The MIRACLE at 70

Gil Troy
Meir Y. Soloveichik
Gerald M. Steinberg
Seth Mandel
John Podhoretz

THE FATALIST CONCEIT

Progressives can’t remodel the country through politics—and it’s making them miserable

BY NOAH C. ROTHMAN
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ISRAEL is the 26th-richest country on Earth, according to the World Bank. Now, Israelis will tell you, not without reason, that the wealth numbers provide an improper view of everyday life in their country. The inequality gap is a Grand Canyon–like chasm there. It’s hard for the young to find good jobs and decent housing, in part because an overly intrusive government sector has made workplace mobility nearly impossible and an overregulated economy makes home construction prohibitively expensive. These difficulties are especially enraging to Israelis because they are self-inflicted wounds that result from what might be called “democratic-socialist entropy.”

But still, Israel is the 26th-richest country on Earth—and the fact that you’ve probably taken this in stride is the reason it’s so extraordinary. Israel’s emergence as a wealthy country is among the countless facts of 2018 that would have seemed unimaginable to the Jews of 1948. Seventy years ago, even poor American Jews like my grandparents would scrape together precious dollars to send to relatives in Palestine, so hardscrabble was their existence. And it remained an economic basket case for decades. In the 1960s, consumer goods of any kind were so scarce in part due to startlingly stupid tariffs imposed by the economically illiterate Labour government that any American traveling there would put out an APB and collect all manner of stuff to bring to family members who were studying in the Holy Land or had made Aliyah. In 1984, while Western nations saw renewed economic growth, Israel had an inflation rate of—get this—450 percent.

The nation broke the back of its inflationary spiral, and then in the early 1990s, something amazing happened: An entirely new economic sector kind of snuck into existence because the hidebound labor apparatchiks in control of communications had no idea what cellular telephony was or what it could do. They were still focused on controlling the landline monopoly called Bezek.

As Wired magazine noted in 1997, “In December 1994, an Israeli cellular start-up called Cellcom...announced the lowest airtime rates anywhere on the planet....In the two years since Cellcom’s launch, the cellular phone, or ‘pelephone,’ as it is referred to generically, has replaced the automatic rifle as the device whose ubiquity now most astonishes Western visitors. From a base of perhaps 70,000 users only two years ago, 900,000 Israelis (out of a total population of 5.7 million) now subscribe to cellular telephone services.” It was this wholesale shift into the digital age that impelled Israel into the world of high-tech from which its wealth spiral has risen.

And now Israel is the 26th-richest country on Earth. The solidification of its economic position has gone hand in hand with its military strength and its determination to continue to exist in spite of the world’s hostility and the wars against it to create another phenomenon no one in 1948 could possibly have imagined. Or no one in 1967. Or 1981. Or the year 2000. And that is the entente between the Jewish state and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia under its Crown Prince, Muhammad bin Salman. This may be the unlikeliest development in 70 years of unlikely developments that have anchored Israel among the community of nations—and a sign that it can outlive its enemies.
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To the Editor:

While I think Christine Rosen is a valuable contributor to the national discourse, I don’t believe she fairly characterizes Jordan Peterson in her column (“The Peterson Principle,” March). She writes that his “examination of the Hebrew Bible is surprising only if one hasn’t read the Bible.” This statement is unfair. Peterson offers a secular analysis of the Bible based both on psychological research and his own life. Most people who promote religion in the modern era either present an enthusiastic take that’s suitable to the Gospel of Health and Wealth but not to serious biblical analysis, or they are so dogmatic about their particular religion that they turn off all but the most ardent believers. Peterson, however, attempts to analyze the significance of the biblical stories without resorting to a dogmatically religious lens. In this way, he is a suitable foil to the “New Atheism” of Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins.

Rosen claims that “most of what [Peterson] writes is neither controversial nor novel.” This misses an important point: Most of Peterson’s readers and viewers had not heard such views espoused before. While Christine Rosen has undoubtedly wrestled with notions of responsibility and living right, the culture is saturated with messages about “following your pleasure” and living for the moment. The seemingly obvious ideas conveyed through Peterson’s witty and humorous style are presented as fresh alternatives. That Peterson has so many YouTube followers is a testament to that fact.

I agree with Rosen that Peterson’s ideas are not breaking barriers or stretching the limits of human cognition. But she should not be so quick to discount someone who is inspiring to those who may regularly read Commentary or similar magazines. Surely, that counts for something.

Jack Doll
New York City

To the Editor:

I respectfully disagree with Christine Rosen’s treatment of Jordan Peterson and her understanding of the male angst he is attempting to address. While past crises of masculinity generated pop psychologists and quasi-religious hucksters, the present anxiety is uniquely attributable to an existential threat to the concept of maleness itself. Peterson and his followers sense that the masculine is not on a voyage of discovery; it’s
a ship taking on water and in danger of sinking. Many social-justice warriors and radical feminists are willfully abetting that process, as it fits in with a war on the traditional norms of Western civilization.

Rosen offers Peterson a cursory nod of approval for his efforts on behalf of free speech, but he deserves even more praise for his efforts. Canada’s laws now criminalize speech that simply offends the subjective senses of the hearer. These laws also compel Canadian citizens to use particular words in public discourse. These are big steps on the path to totalitarianism.

Jordan Peterson may seem an imperfect guru, but he speaks the words we need. It is unworthy to characterize his work and persona so dismissively.

Douglas Weekes
Orange, New Hampshire

To the Editor:

JORDAN Peterson has enjoyed a meteoric rise in popularity recently, so there is some merit in slowing his ascent a bit; it is always good to stay calm. Christine Rosen’s article about him, however, was disappointing.

Rosen writes that Peterson “earns more than $60,000 a month from the crowdfunding site Patreon.” That is a bit catty. More important, Rosen equates Peterson with a long line of popular “relationship counselors” and purveyors of “mythopoetic masculinity” such as John Gray and Robert Bly. If Rosen were to read Peterson’s first book, Maps of Meaning, she would find it anything but a work intended for popular consumption. It is an in-depth examination of the origins of culture as we know it. Maps of Meaning is 564 finely wrought pages and includes 668 footnotes. In it, Peterson makes seminal observations, which are

Commentary

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anchored by an enormous amount of research.

Rosen complains that Peterson brings nothing new to the discussion. This strikes me as a progressive claim. Isn’t it a foundational conservative belief that the best way to know how to proceed is to realize fully where we are? And in this way, the best, most authentic path will reveal itself.

Carl Nelson
Belpre, Ohio

Christine Rosen writes:

Jack Doll is correct that Jordan Peterson is inspiring to many people. I do not question the devotion of his followers. What I do question is what they think they’re following.

Douglas Weekes is upset that I dismissed Peterson too cursorily and that I fail to understand the depth of the challenge facing men today. I share Mr. Weekes’s concerns about contemporary culture’s understanding of masculinity, as well as the many ways in which men today are considered guilty until proven innocent in a range of settings (school, work, relationships). I just don’t believe Peterson is the person who is likely to offer a lasting solution to this challenge. On the contrary, the reactionary tone of much of his work is likely to worsen it.

As for Carl Nelson’s claim that I was being “catty” by mentioning how much Jordan Peterson earns from his personal website, I intended no insult. I mentioned it because I believe it’s important for his followers and potential fans to understand that Peterson is in business—and that business is Jordan Peterson. That is absolutely his right, of course, but it suggests that Peterson’s mission isn’t as selfless or as thankless as he often implies in his public statements.

As for Mr. Nelson’s suggestion that I read Maps of Meaning, with its “668 footnotes,” I can assure him that I did. In fact, while I can understand the popular appeal of Peterson’s Twelve Rules for Living as self-help, I do not think he warrants the praise he has received for his scholarship (most of it from people who are not scholars). Maps of Meaning, which Peterson spends a lot of time boasting about in Twelve Rules and which also serves as the basis for many of his YouTube lectures, is a muddle. It doesn’t succeed as psychology, anthropology, or philosophy. With its sweeping and unsubstantiated claims about mythology and its boiled-over Nietzschean sensibility, it reminds me of the fictional Edward Casaubon’s Keys to All Mythology in George Eliot’s Middlemarch—a case study of the perils of scholarly grandiosity. Alas, the presence of hundreds of footnotes does not make a masterwork make. Nor does the presence of lots of YouTube fans make for a masterful public intellectual. Enjoy Peterson as a performer (and praise him for his pro-free-speech stances), but don’t buy into (either literally or figuratively) his particular cult of personality.

The Reality of Arendt

To the Editor:

Ruth R. Wisse has written a scholarly, levelheaded, and much-needed article recounting the longstanding after-effects of Hannah Arendt’s work (“The Enduring Outrage of Hannah Arendt’s Eichmann in Jerusalem,” March). I noticed that Wisse did not mention the celebrated 2012 movie Hannah Arendt, directed by Margarethe von Trotta. Perhaps this was because the film was a silly piece of hero-worship. The movie nevertheless illustrates how Arendt lives on in the public imagination and how her antipathy toward Israel is appropriated and deployed by the present anti-Zionist left.

I was so irritated by the film that I swiftly grabbed Eichmann in Jerusalem to check the extent to which the movie’s vices originate in its protagonist. Not surprisingly, what one reads today as transparently contemptuous in the infamous report, Von Trotta portrays as courageous, perceptive, and steadfast.

At the height of the story, an emphatic Arendt (portrayed by Barbara Sukowa) declares before her admiring students that the darkest aspect of the Holocaust turned out to be the accommodation facilitated by the Jewish leadership, since—she says—only a fraction would have died had accommodation not been so forthcoming. Arendt’s suggestion is offensive and disturbing enough to warrant further dramatic development, but the heroine in the movie only concludes in her boisterous voice: “And this is a fact!” And so, without further ado, the issue is settled: The Jews brought it on themselves. The phrasing in this scene is not in Arendt’s book, where the author flimsily attempted to support her condemnation. But whatever conscious or unconscious motives may have driven Arendt’s all-encompassing accusa-
tion, it stinks of disingenuousness, ill will, and cheap showmanship.

Yishai Jusidman
Los Angeles, California

To the Editor:

RUTH R. WISSE makes clear the deep wisdom of Norman Podhoretz’s initial assessment of Hannah Arendt. Brilliant philosophers are seduced by the fantasies of the right (Heidegger) and left (Sartre), and no one has the courage—and it does take courage—to fall back humbly onto simple moral judgments of right and wrong.

We are all crooked timber and weak clay, but we can be grateful that we retain the freedom to evaluate modern brilliance against conservative intellectual and religious traditions. And if called upon, we hope to have the courage and insight to strive toward wisdom.

Gilbert R. Sandgren
Green Bay, Wisconsin

Ruth R. Wisse writes:

I AM grateful to Yishai Jusidman, who amplified my essay with an example of the hagiographic treatment Arendt receives in popular culture. The unfortunate tilt of historic judgment to the side of deceit may be why Gilbert R. Sandgren believes it takes courage to correct plain judgments of right and wrong. Should we call it courage in a society that guarantees the right to free speech, or moral confidence—the ability to distinguish and declare right from wrong when those distinctions are being erased or the categories inverted? I’d set the bar for courage a little higher and expect more plain decency even when it is not forthcoming.

To the Editor:

FOR CENTURIES, Polish-Jewish interaction has rarely been positive, mainly been bad, and, occasionally been ugly (“The Dark Return of Polish Anti-Semitism,” March). As Ben Cohen makes clear, the recent IPN Act has already unleashed dormant raw anti-Semitism among a range of Poles. Poland has long profited financially from Nazi death-camp tours and faux-Jewish cultural venues. Extreme nationalists evidently now seek to cash in further on a bowdlerized Holocaust.

Though Poland certainly suffered grievously during WWII and afterwards, and the records show a few heroic Poles who harbored Jews at the most critical hour, it cannot be allowed to escape its collective shameful past. The Jedwabne and Kielce pogroms are emblematic of a pitch-black time when hidden Jews faced constant fatal exposure and when beleaguered fighters feared Polish partisans nearly as much as they did their common foe.

The best response to the latest Polish affront would take the form of a renewed effort by scholars to fearlessly and fully expose the historical record.

Richard D. Wilkins
Syracuse, New York

Ben Cohen writes:

RICHARD Wilkins is entirely correct when he asserts that historians are in the forefront of the battle over Holocaust commemoration—a battle that the Polish government has regretfully made necessary with its amended IPN Act. But there is a separate, if related, battle against contemporary anti-Semitism in Poland, and that requires leadership of another kind.

In the time that has passed since President Duda signed the IPN Act into law, Poland has been awash with a phenomenon more commonly seen in Western Europe: widespread anti-Semitic prejudice rooted in a grisly competition with Jews over victimhood. This is coupled with indignant denials that the slanders and attacks on individual Jews (or perceived Jewish sympathizers, or “the Jews” as a collective) can be legitimately deemed “anti-Semitic.” As the Palestinian leadership has done for decades, Polish government ministers and parliamentarians now accuse the Jews of exaggerating and exploiting the Holocaust for political and financial gain. Any Pole who resists this view is, they say, probably a Jew.

What Mr. Wilkins identifies as “raw anti-Semitism” continues to seep forth, especially on Polish state-owned media. Our elected politicians and our generously funded human-rights organizations should be encouraged to make this fight their fight.
REMEMBER SHANNON FAULKNER? She was the woman who, in 1993, sued the Citadel, one of the last all-male public educational institutions in the U.S., for refusing to allow her to enroll. She won her case, but after five days as a member of the Citadel’s Corps of Cadets, Faulkner left in tears, claiming that the stress of the trial she had just won and the strain of being the only woman at the school made it impossible for her to continue.

Faulkner was one of the celebrities of the 1990s-era push for gender integration, hailed by feminists as a trailblazer (and often unfairly pilloried by opponents of the court ruling). Despite her brief tenure at the Citadel, she appeared to be on the right side of history. In U.S. v. Virginia, a 1996 case that challenged the legality of another all-male public college, the Virginia Military Institute, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg declared that the “Constitution’s equal protection guarantee precludes Virginia from reserving exclusively to men the unique educational opportunities V.M.I. affords.” Gender-exclusive institutions (at least those that received public funding) were verboten.

Until now. Today, gender exclusivity, like gender fluidity, is all the rage—at least for women. Were she a student today, Shannon Faulkner could flee the oppressively masculine Citadel for the womanly protection of the Wing. For those who haven’t yet heard of it, the Wing is the latest (and hottest) entrant in the world of membership-based shared workspaces, with three clubs in New York, one in Washington, D.C., and many more planned for cities around the world. Like the co-working behemoth WeWork (which is also one of its investors), the Wing markets itself to successful people who seek a welcoming transitional space where they can network, dine, or freshen up in “wellness rooms” stocked with Glossier and Chanel beauty products.

“Consider The Wing your throne away from home,” the company’s website enthuses. Alas, Shannon Faulkner, who became a school teacher, would likely find the Wing’s steep membership fees—$2,350 per year—cost-prohibitive.

Also prohibitive is the Wing’s membership policy: It is off-limits to anyone who isn’t female or who doesn’t “identify as a woman.” (The Wing is woke about trans-genderism; even Chelsea Manning is a member.) Why exclude men? The Wing’s original mission statement (a poster of which is available for purchase in its online store) reads in part: “The Wing was born out of the conviction that women need and deserve space designed to make their lives easier and that magic happens when women of different minds and passions gather together.”

That magic can’t happen with men around, evidently, although the club is not averse to men who can raise venture capital and fix the plumbing for them. As the New York Times noted, the Wing “has retained the services of some men. For instance, Tony Florence, a general partner at the venture capital firm NEA, led an $8 million fund-raising round.” The club has also “used male plumbers and electricians.”

Christine Rosen is managing editor of the Weekly Standard.
But these are clearly the exceptions. On its online store, the Wing hawks hot-pink key chains that read, “Girls doing whatever the f--- they want in 2018” and T-shirts that say “Boys Beware.” They might cover it in cheeky phrasing and a Millennial pink color scheme, but the Wing is marketing misandry. And progressive politics. Invited speakers for Wing events are always from the left; Senator Kristen Gillibrand recently spoke at the Wing in New York City, for example, and the wallpaper at the Wing’s new Brooklyn outpost features images of “prominent Brooklyn women” such as Ginsburg and Women’s March co-founder and noted anti-Semite Linda Sarsour.

But the Wing’s unofficial patron saint is Hillary Clinton. When Clinton arrived to speak to a recent members-only Wing audience, the club tweeted, “All hail @Hillary Clinton!!!!” During the event, co-founder Audrey Gelman motioned to the audience of hundreds of women and, according to the Wing’s live-tweeted version of the event, told Hillary, “This is part of your legacy.” The hyperventilations continued when Hillary tweeted a thank-you for hosting her, and the Wing responded with three crying-face emoji and the phrase, “breathes into paper bag.”

Gelman wasn’t kidding when she told the New York Times, “We’re a coven, not a sorority.”

Advocates for women-only spaces like the Wing argue that they are crucial for female empowerment because women need “safe spaces” free from male interference or harassment. What do women do within these “safe” spaces? Complain. A lot. Consider the once-secret Facebook group, What Would Virginia Woolf Do?, founded by fortysomething former literary agent Nina Collins. The New York Times recently reported on the turmoil within the group, which is described as a place for women to discuss everything from dry skin to “vaginal atrophy,” all in the pursuit of a vaguely defined empowerment. The group quickly gained tens of thousands of followers and just as quickly devolved into bickering and gossip among participants. Some group members were miffed when Collins announced that she would be publishing a book, What Would Virginia Woolf Do? And Other Questions I Ask Myself as I Attempt to Age Without Apology, based on the Facebook group’s postings. According to the New York Times, “Ms. Collins details her adventures in the orgy tent at Burning Man... her struggles with depression and her adherence to an expensive beauty routine that includes fake eyelashes and Botox,” as well as regular doses of Xanax. It’s likely not what Virginia Woolf had in mind when she mused about a woman’s need for a room of her own.

Gelman, the Wing’s co-founder, told the New York Times last year, “We still believe women deserve spaces of their own.” That’s what the leaders of formerly all-male institutions like the Citadel and VMI believed as well. Why is gender segregation okay for the goose but not the gander? It turns out it may not be.

The New York City Commission on Human Rights recently launched an investigation into the Wing’s membership practices, which prompted a swift backlash and lots of angry denunciations on social media by Wing supporters. Actress Amber Tamblyn tweeted, “Hi @BilldeBlasio I see you follow me here on Twitter. We have a problem. Why are you allowing...
my tax dollars to be used by @NYCCHR to investigate a cherished space for women called @the_wing when we can barely obtain safety for our bodies, let alone our working environments?” Monica Lewinsky tweeted, “#IStandWithTheWing.”

The Wing wasted no time spinning the story as a narrative of rank injustice. Gelman issued a passive-aggressive statement: “Quite surprisingly, the Commission reached out to us on the first day of Women’s History Month. That call has resulted in nothing more than an agreement to meet and have a conversation—in fact, we have been assured that the de Blasio administration fully supports the mission of The Wing and will work with us to see it prosper. Because of the history of women in this country—and even more so in this time we live in—it is important to protect and foster the work of The Wing and similar spaces that give women a positive and safe space to thrive.”

Melissa Murray, a law professor at University of California, Berkeley, told the feminist website Jezebel, “Leaving aside the fact that so many workplaces seem to be rife with incidents of sexual harassment, now, after #MeToo, I think there are a lot of men in positions of authority who are going to be really skeptical and afraid to mentor women and that might make a space like this even more necessary.” She also said the Wing could apply for an exception to the law based on “bona fide considerations of public policy.”

This seems doubtful, and not just because a group of 11 gender-studies and law professors signed a petition supporting the investigation and pointing out, as New York magazine reported, that the Wing was using the same justifications cited by segregationists during the civil-rights movement. The club already boasts thousands of members and has all the hallmarks of a public-facing business. It has accepted investment funds from WeWork and eagerly sells Wing merchandise, suggesting it sees itself as more of a commercial enterprise than a private club. “Businesses that choose to serve the public in this way subject themselves to a variety of state regulations, including antidiscrimination laws,” the ACLU recently noted.

The Wing is not backing down. A recent tweet was defiant: “The Wing firmly believes that women deserve safe spaces in a male-dominated world. Human rights means protecting and empowering women, not taking even more away from them.”

The real question is what is being taken away from these privileged women if men are allowed entry to their sacred space? Given the Wing’s steep membership fees and target audience of successful professional women, how is it different from a country club full of rich old white guys? Even some potential Wing members embrace the exclusionary attitudes of the worst private clubs. As one eager Wing applicant posted recently on Twitter, “Do you think I can use NYC and SF locations with a @the_wing membership because that would be heavenly. Can you IMAGINE going to a café without being hit on or accosted by homeless people?”

Nor do the Wing’s claims to be building on the history of women’s clubs withstand scrutiny. Consider Sorosis, a private women’s club founded in 1868 by Jane Croly for women who had been denied entry to professional men’s clubs. Croly was one of the first women to write a syndicated newspaper column and mother to progressivism’s founding father, Herbert Croly. She described Sorosis’s mission as “municipal housekeeping,” which included a great deal of service work as well as professional development, and she went on to help form the General Federation of Women’s Clubs. Croly also aggressively avoided hosting discussions of controversial political issues such as suffrage.

The 19th-century women’s clubs’ code of conscience is long gone. Today, the Wing offers its members a vaguely defined sense of “safety” from the real world instead. Women of Croly’s generation marched into Delmonico’s in New York to hold their early organizational meetings because the restaurant typically refused to serve women unless they were accompanied by men and these club ladies wanted to make a point with their boldness. Wing women retreat to their expensively appointed safe space to blow-dry their hair and commiserate about Hillary’s election loss. You’ve come a long way, ladies—but in the wrong direction. ➤
IN EARLY APRIL, Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, was getting ready to come to Washington to apologize, but first he had to make an apology. This warm-up apology was made to civil-rights activists in Myanmar, who are trying to stop murderous attacks against Rohingya Muslims. After the activists complained that Facebook encouraged the violence by allowing the publication of incendiary messages on its platform, Zuckerberg sent them a personal email. He and Facebook, he said, would make things right by monitoring the situation more carefully. He was sorry.

Another day, another apology. This is life for Mark Zuckerberg these days: one damn apology after another. He's like a waiter spinning his way through an overcrowded room balancing a tray of drinks: Sorry, ‘scuse me, sorry, whoops, oh sh--, so sorry, won't happen again, sorry... Indeed, this is the way things have been for Zuckerberg for a long time now. By the time he arrived in Washington to testify before Congress, tech writers for Fast Company, Wired, and other outlets had helpfully gathered compendiums of the many regrets issued during “Zuckerberg's 14-Year Apology Tour.”

I can hear you say, incredulous, 14 years? He must have started the tour when he was two and a half. Zuckerberg's youthful looks—his face, which has the aspect of a Roman emperor's marble bust, is as unlined as an egg—can be deceptive: He is 34, in fact, and it's been 14 years since he founded a forerunner of Facebook in his dorm room at Harvard. And no sooner had he founded it than he began apologizing for it. Facemash allowed Harvard students to rate one another's looks online, and Zuckerberg had to take down the site after half an hour, so instantaneous and intense was the outrage. An open letter to the campus followed: “I apologize for any harm done as a result of my neglect...”

That first apology was for an act of colossal bad taste. Since then, as Facebook piled up users by the tens and then hundreds of millions, Zuckerberg's apologies have tended to revolve around the issue of privacy. The irony is hard to miss. How can customers get touchy about their privacy on a free service they joined precisely so they could shimmy and gyrate and expose details of their personal lives in front of people they may or may not know? I've never posted anything to my Facebook account, but I checked recently and found that over the years I have approved 700 friends, only a handful of whom are friends in the old, pre-Facebook sense of the term. To judge by their posts, many of my Facebook not-really-friends seem to have forgotten the difference.

In 2006, some users thought an early version of its News Feed showed that Facebook was sharing their personal information without permission. “That was a big mistake and I'm sorry for it,” said Zuckerberg. A year later, Facebook introduced a feature called Beacon, with the same disgorgement of private data. “I apologize for it,” he said. Three years later, the Wall Street Journal revealed that Facebook was exposing user IDs to advertisers, and Zuckerberg wrote an apologetic op-ed in the Washington Post. He posted a kind of catch-all apology to users a year later.

And then, starting with the 2016 election, came the calamities that brought Zuckerberg to apologize before Congress: the “fake news” stories that flooded Facebook from bogus Russian accounts, followed by the revelation that a British firm, Cambridge Analyti-
ca, had acquired the data of 50 million—no, wait, that's 70 million—no, it looks like 87 million Facebook users. (By the time you read this, the much-revised number may have been updated again.) Most unforgivable of all, the data were made available to the Trump campaign.

So Zuckerberg came to Washington to face his inquisitors, sitting as erect as a schoolboy outside the principle's office. “I’m sorry,” he said, as if for the first time. By now it’s clear that for Zuckerberg, architect of a virtual world, apologies are virtual, too: simulacra of regret, a social nicety used to buy time until the next apology becomes unavoidable. In a happy coincidence, this is how apologies work in Washington, too.

The capital, after all, is where the passive construction “mistakes were made” was first fashioned and where wised-up professionals use the phrase “non-apology apology” without queasiness or irony. The virtual apology fits with the metaphysical assumption that underlies most government policymaking: There are no trade-offs in the world of the Washington imagination. It is a world where we can tighten business regulation without squeezing business, or cut taxes without losing revenue, or raise the costs of employment without costing jobs. Surely in such an environment, Zuckerberg can apologize for making a mistake without being required to stop making it.

In his endless grilling by the superannuated windbags of Capitol Hill—on his first day of testimony, the combined age of his first four questioners was 303—Zuckerberg said he was in favor of some kind of regulation of social media, including Facebook. Some dewy-eyed innocents were taken aback by this willingness to kneel before the federal government. But quite apart from the ill will created by the privacy and Russia scandals, Zuckerberg came to Washington at an awkward moment for his company—awkward enough to see whether the government can freeze the status quo for Facebook before things get worse.

There is some evidence that Facebook, while still hugely profitable, is reaching saturation levels. Meanwhile, social scientists are compiling evidence, such as it is, that Facebook use is addictive, socially retarding, or otherwise harmful to the commonweal. It is an article of faith in conservative and Republican circles that Facebook is run by left-wing partisans who narrow the reach and suppress the speech of voices from the political and cultural right. Left-wingers assume with equal vigor that Facebook's tolerance of fake news threw the election to Donald Trump.

The company has made powerful enemies. With the rise of Facebook, big media companies retooled the way they disseminated news to take advantage of an audience that was seemingly limitless and endlessly targetable. And then last year Facebook announced it would pass along fewer new articles to fewer users, narrowing the online audience that media companies had just begun to monetize. You don’t see many puff pieces about Facebook in the mainstream press anymore. But you do see a lot of editorials insisting the company be reined in, somehow.

Editorials like these sound like they’re written by people who have never heard the phrase “regulatory capture.” It is a commonplace that mature businesses, seeing fewer options for growth, seek stability and often find it in the regulatory protection of the federal government. Any set of regulations agreeable to Zuckerberg would likely preserve Facebook’s dominance in its many markets. One proposal—that any fake news story found on social media be identified and pulled down within 72 hours—would require the kind of manpower and artificial-intelligence algorithms that only Facebook could afford, putting competitors at a disadvantage. Expanding the Federal Trade Commission’s policing powers would extend to smaller rivals the same close scrutiny that Facebook already draws.

By inviting regulation, of course, Zuckerberg takes a gamble. He runs the risk that he won’t be able to manipulate the rules and red tape as he hopes. Having alienated both liberals and conservatives, Facebook lacks an obvious political protector. The hearings revealed that the source of much of the anti-Facebook hostility isn’t so much that the company manipulates private information but that it makes money doing so. In 2020, a new administration less friendly to the idea of profit could be in power, and Facebook would find its new federal friend much less cooperative. Nevertheless, Zuckerberg’s gamble turns out, one thing is certain: He’ll be sorry. :(
SEVENTY YEARS AGO, on the 14th of May, David Ben-Gurion and his Zionist compatriots were poised to declare the first Jewish commonwealth in almost two millennia. Israel's founders, however, were delayed, bogged down in a matter of textual minutiae. Rabbi Yehuda Leib Maimon, rabbinic representative of the Religious Zionist movement, proclaimed himself unwilling to sign any Declaration of Independence that made no reference to the God of Israel. Aharon Zisling, the secular head of the socialist party Mapam, asserted that he could not affirm the existence of a God in Whom he did not believe. The British were departing, the Arab armies were descending, and the Jews were debating whether God existed.

It was Ben-Gurion himself who proposed a compromise: Israel's Declaration of Independence would conclude by asserting that each signer placed his trust in the “Rock of Israel,” the ṭseʿur Yisrael, a phrase from the Jewish liturgy inspired by the biblical reference to God as ṭseʿurī ve-goʾālī, my Rock and my Redeemer.

By referring to the “Rock of Israel,” but refraining from any explicit mention of divine redemption, Israel's declaration was one that both devout and atheist Zionists could affirm. For believers in the Bible, the phrase could refer to the divine defender of the Jewish people; for the secular socialist signers of the document, the words could instead make reference to the flint-like resolution of the Israeli army. The compromise was accepted, and the modern Jewish state was born by eliding the issue of the existence of God.

For myself, a religious Zionist and American-history aficionado, the story is doubly painful. Thomas Jefferson, the deistic drafter of the Declaration in Philadelphia, produced a first version without any reference to the divine designs of history. The continental Congress, however, representing an America obsessed with the Bible, edited the dramatic closing of the original draft so that it made clear that the revolution was being launched with “a firm reliance on divine providence.”

The irony is difficult to miss. America, inspired by the Israelite commonwealth in the Hebrew Bible, ordered that a reference to a providential God be added to its Declaration of Independence. But in the 20th century, the restored Israelite commonwealth went out of its way to remove any such reference.

For religious Zionists, however, removing God from a document did not do away with God's role in the divinely directed drama that is Jewish history; in fact, the contrary is true. Sidney Morgenbesser, the kibitzing Columbia philosopher, once inquired of a colleague at the end of his life: “Why is God making me suffer so much? Just because I don't believe in him?” Morgenbesser's droll dialectic captures, for people of faith, something profound: It is those agnostic of God's existence who can at times reify that very same existence. In a much more profound sense, the events that preceded and followed Israel's declaration of statehood are so staggering that providence alone explains them.

Harry Truman, the former member of the Missouri political machine whom no one had ever expected to become president of the United States, overrode his hero, General George C. Marshall, in supporting and recognizing the birth of a Jewish state. And he did so,
in part, because of his relationship with a Jew named Eddie Jacobson, with whom Truman had run a haberdashery business decades before.

Joseph Stalin, whose anti-Semitism rivaled Hitler’s, ordered the Soviet bloc at the United Nations to support partition, and then he allowed Czechoslovakia to sell airplanes and arms to the nascent state. The Jews of the IDF, fighting against overwhelming odds, did indeed illustrate flint-like toughness in their heroic victory; but the honest student of history can see that this is only part of the story.

Seventy years after May 14, 1948, religious Zionists still smart at the words with which Israel came into being. At the same time, they take comfort in the fact that what followed that extraordinary day vindicates their own interpretation of the words Tzur Yisrael. In his memoir, former Israeli Chief Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, the youngest survivor of Buchenwald, describes the moment when the concentration camp was liberated by Patton’s Third Army. Many inmates, having longed for release, ran to the gates—and as they did so, the Nazis, in a final attempt at murdering the prisoners, opened fire from the guard tower. Lau was in the line of fire; suddenly, someone jumped on him and held him down until the shooting had stopped. Having no idea who had saved his life, Lau made his way to Palestine, attended yeshiva, and entered the rabbinate. The first position for which he interviewed was chief rabbi of Netanya. Interviewing for the job with city officials, he encountered hours of question from the mayor of Netanya and his staff. The deputy mayor of Netanya, a man by the name of David Anilevitch, who ought to have been deeply involved in the interview, sat on the side and oddly said nothing. As the interview came to a close, Anilevitch stood up and said:

Friends, honored rabbi, before we disperse, please allow me to say my piece... I have been reliving 11 April 1945. I was deported from my hometown to Buchenwald. On April 11, American airplanes circled in the skies above the camp. The prisoners, myself among them, were first out of the barracks. As we ran, a hail of bullets passed us. Among those running toward the gate was a little boy... I jumped on top of him, threw him to the ground, and lay over him to protect him from the bullets. And today I see him before me alive and well. Now I declare this to all of you: I, David Anilevitch, was saved from that horror, fought in the Palmach, and today serve as deputy mayor of an Israeli city.

Anilevitch, Lau concludes, then banged on the table so that all the glasses shook and said: “If I have the merit of seeing this child, whom I protected with my body, become my spiritual leader, then I say to you that there is a God.”

The definition of a miracle is an event that should not naturally have occurred. For us, this tends to mean the splitting of the sea, the stopping of the sun, the opening of the earth. Yet, by the very same definition, it is a miracle that Israel was born, and endured in the way that it did. It is a miracle that after a generation in which many Jewish children grew up without parents, let alone grandparents, we have experienced the fulfillment of Zachariah’s prophecy that grandparents will watch their grandchildren play in the streets of Jerusalem. It is a miracle that after so many civilizations have disappeared, Jewish children continue to be born. It is a miracle that as anti-Semitism continues to haunt the nations of Europe that religious Judaism flourishes in Israel even as a now secular Europe demographically declines.

More than any other event in the last 70 years, the state that was born in avoidance of any explicit affirmation of Israel’s God now stands as the greatest argument for the existence of that very same God. And that is why many Jews, on the 70th anniversary of Israel’s independence, will recite with renewed fervor prayers in the daily traditional liturgy that 70 years ago had been at least partially fulfilled:

O Rock of Israel,  
Arise in defense of Israel,  
And redeem, as you have promised,  
Judah and Israel.  
Our redeemer, the Lord of Hosts is your Name, the Sacred One of Israel  
Blessed are you, O Lord, Who redeemed Israel.  

The Miracle at 70 : May 2018
THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BURDEN on liberals in the age of Donald Trump is immense. Barack Obama was a commanding presence on the American stage for eight years, but he left a small and ever-shrinking legacy. The Trump administration has cut short or outright reversed a number of his progressive initiatives, and many of the Obama policies that survive had already failed to deliver the results he had promised. And politically he left his party in tatters; by the end of Obama’s presidency, more than 1,000 Democratic officeholders had been unseated throughout the country. Progressive hope has turned to ashes.

The liberal malaise that has followed Trump’s shocking victory is a by-product of the left’s unreasonable expectations. Many liberals and progressives were encouraged to see Barack Obama as messianic and to understand his politics as emancipatory, and they fell

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for it. But political shifts in America just aren’t that radical, and never have been—even though that’s what the flimflam men who run American politics always promise.

Delusions about what big election victories can achieve are nurtured by the politicians who stand to benefit from the passion of those who are swayed by their portentous prognostications. (“This is the most important election of our lifetime,” says the party that needs to win to come back from defeat.) And they are husbanded by the commercial enterprises—paid consultants, super PACs, single-issue peddlers, cable networks—that profit from them. But the vows they make—primary among them the vanquishing for eternity of the bad guys on the other side—cannot be fulfilled, or cannot be fulfilled enough to satisfy the voters who are seduced by them. This is a problem for both sides of the ideological divide.

At the moment, what we’re living through is disillusion on the part of progressives, and on a grand scale. A consensus has begun to form on the politically engaged left that the day-to-day work of American politics—meaning what happens in government and in public service—is simply unequal to the challenges that plague our country. This follows, in turn, the same sort of consensus that rose among conservative voters in 2015 and 2016 that led to the rise of the insurgent Trump candidacy.

Fewer and fewer Americans see the grinding work of passing legislation and formulating policy as anything other than a sham, an act, a Washington con. This view encourages frustration and, eventually, fatalism. The conviction that the political process cannot address the most relevant issues of the day is paralyzing and radicalizing both parties. It is also wrong.

**THE LIBERAL SOUNDRACK OF DAILY LIFE**

**PEOPLE ON THE AMERICAN LEFT HAVE REASON to be happy these days. Boilerplate liberalism has become the soundtrack to daily American life. But they’re not happy; far from it.**

Superstar athletes don’t stand for the National Anthem. Awards shows have become primetime pep rallies where progressive celebrities address the nation on matters of social justice, diversity, and the plague of inequality. This year’s Academy Awards even featured the actress Ashley Judd’s endorsement of “intersectionality,” a once-abstract pseudo-academic term meant to convey that every kind of prejudice against every victimized minority is connected to every other kind of prejudice against every other victimized minority. These are the outwardly observable signs of a crisis facing the liberal mission. The realization that the promise of the Obama era had failed predated Donald Trump’s election, but it has only recently become a source of palpable trauma across the liberal spectrum.

These high-profile examples are just the most visible signs of a broader trend. At the noncelebrity level, polls confirm a turning away from conservative social mores altogether. In 2017, Gallup’s annual values-and-beliefs survey found a record number of Americans approving of doctor-assisted suicide, same-sex relations, pornography, both sex and childbirth out of wedlock, polygamy, and divorce.

Then there’s the ascension of supposedly advanced attitudes about religion, or rather, the lack of religion. In 2017, Gallup pollsters asked Americans: “How important would you say religion is in your own life?” A record low of 51 percent answered “very important,” while a record high of 25 percent said “not very important.” San Diego State University researcher Jean M. Twenge found that twice as many Americans said they did not believe in God in 2014 than was the case in the early 1980s. And a 2015 Pew poll revealed that “younger Millennials” (those born between 1990 and 1996) were less likely to claim religious affiliation than any previous generation.

Finally, a 2016 Harvard University survey found that, among adults between ages 18 and 29, 51 percent did not support capitalism. Positive views of socialism have been rising almost inexorably, even as a 2016 CBS/New York Times survey found that only 16 percent of Millennials could accurately define socialism.

But today’s progressive activist isn’t content with cultural domination; he’s after something grander. As Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote in a memorandum dated March 2003: “The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change the culture and save it from itself.” The election of Obama seemed the moment at which the central liberal truth could finally be given shape and form and body. It didn’t quite work out as progressives hoped.

The first bill President Obama signed into law in 2009, the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, was sold to progressives as a visionary effort to root out workplace discrimination. In fact, all it did was relax the statute of limitation on holding firms liable for discriminating on the basis of sex and race—a fine-tuning of one part of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Yet the “pay gap” persisted, and Obama and his administration spent the next
seven years hectoring the private sector over it. They claimed that the figures showing that women in aggregate earned less than men in aggregate demonstrated that the entire society was somehow in violation of the spirit of the law. But the real source of this gap—as Obama’s own Bureau of Labor Statistics confessed—was individual behavior patterns that led women, on average, to work fewer hours than men over the course of their lives. “Among women and men with similar ‘human capital’ characteristics,” BLS economist Lawrence H. Leith wrote in 2012, “the earnings gap narrows substantially and in some cases nearly disappears.”

Similarly, in 2013, Obama credited his Violence Against Women Act with steep declines in rates of reported sexual assault. “It changed our culture,” he said. “It empowered people to start speaking out.” But this legislation did not change the culture. Many women continued to endure abuse at their places of work, with that abuse treated as just a consequence of doing business. The behaviors revealed by the #MeToo movement in the national outing of abusive men in positions of power had been addressed in law long ago, and long before Obama signed the Violence Against Women Act. The stroke of his pen did nothing to change the culture.

ObamaCare is another example of an exercise in cultural engineering that has failed to take. The Affordable Care Act wasn’t only a health-care law; it was an effort to transform society. The law’s true goal was a “culture of coverage” that would foster a new “norm” in which health coverage was an “expected” part of the social contract, according to California Health Benefit Exchange board member Kim Belshe. But once again, the political process failed to match the transformative ambitions of the progressive activist class. A late 2016 survey conducted by the American College of Emergency Physicians found that tighter doctor networks as well as higher deductibles and co-payments meant people were cutting back on doctor visits—the precise opposite of the law’s philosophical objectives.

Donald Trump and his GOP majorities in Congress could not overturn the ACA (though they did manage to get rid of its mandatory aspect). But ObamaCare’s preservation has not prevented the health-care left from sinking into gloom. This is because the politicians who pursued these reforms set unrealistic expectations for what they could achieve. These are not blinkered ideologues, but they are in thrall to a grandiose idea of what politics should be and out of touch with what politics actually is: a messy, narrow, often unsatisfying project of compromise and incrementalism.

Some left-of-center thinkers have addressed this penchant for overreach and its consequences. “Our belief in ‘progress’ has increased our expectations,” lamented the clinical psychologist Bruce Levine in 2013. “The result is mass disappointment.” He reasoned that social isolation was a product of American institutions because, when those institutions resist reform, “we rebel.” That rebellion, he claimed, manifests itself in depression, aggression, self-medication, suicide, or even homelessness and psychosis. What can you expect when the problem is the system itself?

Progressives have come to believe that America is beset with difficulties that must be addressed if the country is to survive—but they recognize that the difficulties they diagnose are extraordinarily hard to deal with in conventional political terms. Income disparities. Sexual and racial inequities. The privileges and disadvantages associated with accidents of birth. Such matters increasingly dominate the agenda of leftist politicians because they preoccupy the minds of their voters and donors. But what can be done about them? Great Society legislation in the 1960s—the farthest-reaching effort to reorder and reframe our country along social-justice principles—was designed to extirpate these evils. It is clear that today’s progressives are convinced we have not progressed very far from those days, if at all. This can lead to only one devastating conclusion, which is that the United States is a structurally oppressive nation. The system is the problem.
For the left, no problem is more hopelessly systemic than racism. It is powerfully attractive to believe that because some American institutions were forged in racial bias, the country is forever soiled by discrimination and white supremacy. Economics, politics, education, criminal justice—all are soiled by what Harvard professor Derrick Bell has said was an indelible stain on American life. Bell’s theories have been amplified by celebrated literary figures such as Ta-Nehisi Coates. “White supremacy is neither a trick, nor a device, but one of the most powerful shared interests in American history,” he recently wrote. You can understand why exasperated activists might conclude that devoting themselves to a Sisyphean torment is not the best use of their time. “I cannot continue to emotionally exhaust myself,” wrote the British journalist and feminist speaker Reni Eddo-Lodge in 2014. In a 2016 Washington Post op-ed, Zack Linly concurred. “I’ve grown too disillusioned to be relieved and too numb to be frustrated. I’m just tired.”

Violence, too, is seen as systemic. Acts of small-scale and mass violence are the result of many factors in American life. The individual who commits those heinous acts is often a secondary concern to activists on the left. For them, the problem rests in our militaristic national character, which is foremost exemplified by a pathological devotion to guns. As a recent headline at the New Republic put it: “America’s Gun Sickness Goes Way Beyond Guns.”

What about substance abuse? “It became clear to us that there is something systemic going on,” said Steven Woolf, director of Virginia Commonwealth University’s Center on Society and Health, on the issue of substance-abuse-related deaths in America. And poverty? “Poverty is systemic, rooted in economics, politics and discrimination,” reads the Southern Poverty Law Center’s guideline for elementary-school teachers. Its lesson plan is explicitly designed to convey to students that “poverty is caused by systemic factors, not individual shortcomings.” Corruption? According to Fordham University Law School professor Zephyr Teachout, when the courts find that corporate entities have much the same free-speech rights as individuals, “corruption becomes democratic responsiveness.” Obesity and diabetes are systemic too, according to TakePart magazine’s Sophia Lepore, because they stem from the industrial world’s “increasingly commercialized food supply.”

When faced with this constellation of systemic challenges, progressives are left with a grim conclusion: We are impotent; change on the scale that is necessary is out of reach. Instead of practicing “the art of the possible,” they have made a totem of the impossible. The activists who are consumed by these phenomena have come (or are coming) to the conclusion that the political process cannot resolve them precisely because the oppression is a feature, not a bug, of the system. It is logical, therefore, for them to determine that engagement in traditional forms of politics is an exercise in naivété.

Indeed, under this set of beliefs, legislative incrementalism and compromise seem like detestable half measures. Mistaking deep-rooted and immensely complex social and cultural circumstances for problems government can solve blinds participants in the political process to the unambiguous victories they’ve actually secured through compromise.

This is a recipe for despair—a despair to which certain segments of the right are not immune.

LIBERAL DESPAIR TRUMPS CONSERVATIVE DESPAIR

BY THE TIME DONALD TRUMP’S PRESIDENTIAL candidacy sprang to life, dejected voices on the right had concluded that the country’s leftward drift constituted an existential emergency.

In late 2015, the author and radio host Dennis Prager devoted most of his time to mourning the “decay” of absolute moral categories, the blurring of gender distinctions, the corruption of education, and the dissolution of the family, all while blaming these conditions on a wrecker’s program. In the fall of 2016, the Claremont Institute published a piece by Republican speechwriter Michael Anton (under a pseudonym) in which he postulated that the United States was all but doomed. He compared the republic to United Airlines Flight 93, the plane that went down in a Pennsylvanian field on 9/11, and its political and bureaucratic leadership to the suicidal Islamist hijackers who killed everyone on board. Four days before the 2016 election, the Heritage Foundation’s Chuck Donovan declared America in decline in almost every way and blamed a “dominant elite who thrive on the dissolution of civil society.” These catastrophists agreed on one thing: The time for modesty and gradualism was over.

The issues that most animate these conservatives are significant, but they are only indirectly related to conventional political matters. Disrespect for authority figures in law enforcement, the accessibility of pornography, assimilation rates among immigrant groups, the bewildering exploits on college campuses, and the ill-defined plague of “cultural Marxism”—these are widespread social trends that resist remedy from the inherently circumspect political process.
Also like those on the left, some conservatives have come to embrace their own forms of fatalism about the American system. “We need a king,” wrote the Hoover Institution’s Michael Auslin in 2014, “or something like one.” Auslin theorized that such a figure would liberate the presidency from weighing in on polarizing social issues, thereby lubricating the gears of government. Reflecting on the disillusionment and pessimism of his big-thinking peers in the middle of the Great Recession, the libertarian billionaire Peter Thiel declared, “I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible.” Patrick J. Buchanan devotes at least one column a month to the virtues of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s authoritarianism. Why? Because, as he wrote in January 2018, “Nationalism trumps democratism.”

Intellectuals like Buchanan and Anton have a profound weakness for extremism; it is one of the grave dangers posed by the life of the mind. William Butler Yeats and Ezra Pound found much to admire in how nationalists detested moderation. For Yeats, the “love of force” was a visionary trait. Pound, of course, literally became a fascist and rooted for America’s destruction. These perverse judgments on the right were nothing next to the seductive power of leftist totalitarianism. George Bernard Shaw was a Stalinist convinced of the virtue of eugenics and murderous purges. Theodore Dreiser became infatuated with the Soviets’ brutal adaptation of social Darwinism. Stuart Chase’s 1932 book A New Deal, predating FDR’s governing program of the same name, heaped praise on the nascent Soviet state. The book famously concluded, “Why should the Soviets have all the fun remaking the world?” Chase later became a member of Roosevelt’s inner circle of advisers.

When the political process fails to perform as they would like, activists and ideologues become disillusioned and embittered. They also become convinced not of the unreasonableness of their position but of the incompetence of their representatives. Thus conservative activists hate the Senate majority leader and the speaker of the House, even though both Mitch McConnell and Paul Ryan work tirelessly to advance conservative ideas through the bodies they help manage. Leftists have turned on House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, who is among the most effective legislative players in recent American history and easily the most progressive Democratic leadership figure of our time. McConnell and Ryan and Pelosi know from bitter experience that the Constitution places obstacles in the path of anyone who wants to use America’s political institutions to remake the culture wholesale. These marvelous obstacles are designed to thwart the human impulse for radical change.

The tragedy here is how this dynamic has convinced tens of millions of Americans that the political system is broken. Pull back from the granular view of events and try to examine America over the past decade and you see something else. You see American voters responding in complex ways to complex events. Obama overreaches and the voters elect a Republican House. Mitt Romney says 47 percent of Americans are losers, and he loses an election. Hillary Clinton says people who don’t care for her are “deplorables,” and she loses an election, too. The GOP appears to be on a path to electoral disaster in November 2018 because Trump may be bringing about a counterattack against the way he does business. Democratic overreach inspires conservative backlash. Republican overreach inspires liberal backlash. The electoral system is responsive to the views of the people. The system works. It works by restraining excessive ambition.

Democratic overreach inspires conservative backlash. Republican overreach inspires liberal backlash. The electoral system is clearly responsive to the views of the people. The system works. It works by restraining excessive ambition.

Those restraints annoy people who think change should just happen because they will it. In 2009, for example, the New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman was so annoyed by Congress’s failure to devise a bipartisan environmental bill that he lamented the fact that America did not have China’s political system. The People’s Republic, he wrote, was demonstrating the great “advantages” of a “one-party autocracy” led by “reasonably enlightened people.” Amazing how Chinese Communism had the ability to circumvent public
You don’t need a one-party autocracy to effect change. Sometimes, when change is needed and needed urgently, government can rally to address the change—when voters make it clear that it must happen and when the change is preceded by rich experimentation and vital spadework. For example, New York City is no longer the crime-ridden, pornography-addled, graffiti-marred archipelago of needle parks that it once was. There has been a generation now of civil peace in the city, notwithstanding the act of war against it on 9/11.

But the change wasn’t the culmination of a grand governmental scheme. It was in part the product of work done by the Bryant Park Restoration Corporation in the early 1980s, which developed a model followed by the Rockefeller Center Complex, the Grand Central Partnership, and more than 30 other business-improvement districts. These parties engaged in a block-by-block effort to restore streets and relocate the homeless. The NYPD and the transit police could not focus on “quality of life” policing without hyper-local input that shaped what that campaign should entail and without an intellectual framework provided by the “broken windows” theory promulgated by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling. The zoning reforms that cleaned up Times Square began as an initiative submitted by the City Council member representing the porn-plagued blocks under the Queensboro Bridge, with input from the Manhattan Institute. By the time Rudolph Giuliani was elected mayor in 1993, a quiet consensus had been building for years about the nature of the problems afflicting New York City and how to solve them.
The Continuing Promise of American Zionism

Seventy years after Israel’s founding, we need it more than ever

By Gil Troy

SIXTY-NINE YEARS AGO, a 28-year-old rabbi published an essay in *Commentary* entitled “American Zionism At an Impasse: A Movement in Search of a Program.” What, the young Arthur Hertzberg wondered in that October 1949 essay, will American Jews do now, after the great fight to establish Israel had ended so triumphantly a year earlier, in May 1948?

Hertzberg understood how helping the Jews over there in the Middle East had helped Jews over here in North America. After decades of American Jewish ambivalence about Jewish nationalism, the Holocaust had created an instant consensus for a Jewish state. The fight to create that state galvanized the community, rousing it from depression—and shielding it from guilt. By doing the right thing in the late 1940s, American Jews atoned for their failure to save more of their doomed brothers and sisters.

Hertzberg’s fear that Zionism was “a movement in search of a program” in 1949 proved wildly premature, because Israel would continue to call on and depend on the support of American Jews for its survival. The nation’s creation was followed by a host of new problems and opportunities that kept the global Jewish community engaged with Israel and kept alive the American Jewish connection to “peoplehood”—even as many American Jews abandoned religious practice entirely.

In 1959, Hertzberg published a seminal anthology, *The Zionist Idea*, for the purpose of establishing the movement’s intellectual and ideological roots. At the time, Israel was fragile and the Zionist conversation was robust. Today, Israel is robust and the Zionist...
The conversation has turned fragile. Israel’s 70th anniversary offers an opportunity to reframe the Zionist conversation—asking not what American Jews can do for Israel, but what Zionism can do for American Jews. Hertzberg understood that Zionism wasn’t only about saving Jewish bodies but saving Jewish souls. As the celebrations of Israel’s 70th birthday begin, Zionism’s capacity to save our souls remains vital.

Many American Jews in the 1950s helped their fellow Jews settle in the new land. The fundraising short from 1954, “The Big Moment,” featuring Hollywood stars including Donna Reed and Robert Young, celebrated the secular miracle. “When you support the United Jewish Appeal, you make it possible for the United Israel Appeal to help the people of Israel,” the short told its viewers. They could help “rush completion of new settlements, new housing for the homeless, the irrigation of wasteland acres…. Israel’s people who stand for freedom must not stand alone.”

Four years later, Leon Uris mythologized the Zionist revolution in his mammoth bestseller, Exodus. “As a literary work it isn’t much,” David Ben-Gurion admitted. “But as a piece of propaganda, it’s the best thing ever written about Israel.” In Uris’s Zionist paradise, New Jews lived noble ideas and heroic lives. Exodus captured the texture of the Jewish return: the trauma of the Holocaust, the joys of the kibbutz, the thrill of rebuilding, the anguish of the Arab fight, the sweetness of idealism, the wonder of mass migration. In the 1960 movie version, Exodus even tackled serious ideological issues within Zionism. As Ari Ben Canaan escorts his non-Jewish love interest, Kitty Fremont, around Israel, the two look over the Valley of Jezreel. They marvel at seeing the “same paving stones that Joshua walked on when he conquered” the land, along with “every clump of trees” Ari’s father planted.

Thrilled that the valley is becoming Jewish once again, Ari proclaims: “I’m a Jew. This is my country.” Kitty dismisses differences between people as artificial. Ari makes the particularist case against universalism: “People are different. They have a right to be different.” They suspend the debate, Hollywood-style, with their first kiss.

In print, on screen, and in song, Exodus cast Zionism in such glowing terms that it condemned Israel to the inevitable comedown. Decades later, Thomas Friedman, trying to justify his anger at the Jewish state as its popularity flagged, would define this mythical place he missed as “your grandfather’s Israel.” Actually, Israel today—Friedman’s Israel—is more compassionate, just, equitable, and democratic than his grandfather’s.

As Exodus climbed the bestseller lists, Hertzberg’s Zionist Idea showed how a series of abstract debates spawned an actual state in mere decades. The texts, Hertzberg’s editor Emanuel Neumann wrote, illustrate “the internal moral and intellectual forces in Jewish life” that shaped this “idea which galvanized a people, forged a nation, and made history…. Behind the miracle of the Restoration lies more than a century of spiritual and intellectual ferment which produced a crystallized Zionist philosophy and a powerful Zionist movement.”

Recalling this period, Abraham Joshua Heschel would say American Jews took that miracle for granted. We became so used to the Tel Aviv Hilton, he said, that we forgot Tel Hai, where the one-armed Zionist warrior Josef Trumpeldor sacrificed his life for his country. Heschel was chiding American Jews for failing to use Israel to find greater meaning, to revitalize their Jewish identities, to launch “an ongoing spiritual revolution.”

Several political shocks in the 1960s upstaged the cultural and spiritual conversation that Heschel, Hertzberg, and others sought. Having grown up feeling secure as Americans, some Baby Boomers questioned American Jewish silence during the Holocaust. Frustrations at their parents’ passivity “while 6 million died” altered the community’s course—triggering a move toward activism. Cries of “Never again” shaped the Zionist, peoplehood-centered fight that ultimately brought 1.2 million Soviet Jews to Israel even as it nurtured and brought to adulthood two generations of new American Jewish leaders and activists.

The biggest shock was the Six-Day War. Both their fear of losing Israel in May 1967 and their euphoria when Israel won that June surprised American Jews. Many discovered that they were more passionate about Israel than they had realized. This “extraordinary response” led Rabbi Yitz Greenberg and
others toward “a strategy of making Israel central in religious and Jewish educational life—if only because thereby we can tap strong loyalties and deep feelings.” The Holocaust and Israel’s founding partially Zionized American Jewry, showing how to live with a Jewish state while living happily ever after; 1967 showed most American Jews that they couldn’t live without the Jewish state.

Zionism became American Jewry’s glue. Israel reinforced a sense of peoplehood and renewed Jewish pride. It inspired the teaching of Hebrew, revitalized summer camps, and invigorated the Conservative and Reform movements. The community learned how to mobilize politically and raise money prodigiously. Indeed, writing in the 1970s, as periodic terrorist massacres kept returning Jews to the traumatic 1973 Yom Kippur War, Hertzberg declared that Zionism had become the only sacred commitment all American Jews shared. “Interruption, ignorance in the Jewish heritage, or lack of faith do not keep anyone from leadership in the American Jewish community today.” Hertzberg complained. “Being against Israel or apathetic in its support does.”

But while it was succeeding politically in America, Zionism was failing culturally and spiritually, Hertzberg charged. “Today there is no Zionist education in the U.S., no schools, no teaching seminars, no commitment by Zionists” to cultivating “a Zionist kind of Jewish personality”—Ben-Gurion’s New Jew. Instead of stirring charges of dual loyalty, instead of adding “to the discomfort of the Jews in the Diaspora,” Hertzberg noted, Zionism contributed to Jews’ “acceptance of themselves and their acceptance by others.”

Today, it seems, personal concerns predominate. Now we wonder how having a Jewish state helps Jews navigate what Birthright Israel calls “their own Jewish journeys” and their quests for meaning. That could seem to be a chaotic souk, an oriental bazaar resulting in a gay Zionism and a Mizrahi Zionism, an Orthodox Zionism and a Reform Zionism, a feminist Zionism and an environmental Zionism. This is not entirely new. Early Zionists also fused their secular, Western agendas with the Jewish agenda—creating the kibbutz and the Histadrut Labor union, among other hybrids of hyphenate Zionism. In fact, a thoughtful Zionism might cure what ails us by focusing on what Israel means “to me, to us.” Which brings us to the greatest contradiction of our age: Succeeding as Americans individually poses a threat to Jews communally. Building careers usually trumps the labor of deepening traditions, morals, or communal commitments. Increasingly, many American Jews are happy being Jew-ish, reducing a profound cultural, intellectual, religious heritage to props, a smattering of superficial symbols to make us stand out just enough to be interesting—and not too much to be threatening.

Academic postmodernism validates that professionally driven Jewish laziness. After slaving away to perfect the CV and GPA, to get into the best college possible, Jewish students arrive on campuses that often caricature Judaism—like all religions—as a repressive system while slamming Zionism as particularly oppressive, privileged, and aggressive. This postmodernist updating of Marxist universalism loathes the kinds of red lines Jews traditionally drew around multiple behaviors and beliefs—among them, intermarrying, denouncing Israel, or indulging in self-indulgent behaviors from tattooing your skin to blowing your mind with drugs or alcohol. But a community cannot exist without any boundaries—it’s as useless as a house with no walls.

More powerful than these ideological issues is the simple fascism of the clock. Few high-achieving American Jews devote much time in their week to being Jewish. The demands of work and the lures of leisure leave little room in the schedule for much else—especially such unhip, pre-modern, and un-postmodern activities.

Then, perhaps most devastating, once American Jews carve out the time and overcome the static, what awaits them in most synagogues is a stale stew of warmed-over nostalgia. Judaism must be more than gefilte fish and lox, more than some colorful Yiddish exclamations and shtetl tales. The superficiality of so many Jewish experiences inside the walls of the large Semitic cathedrals that fill up just three times a year is so dispiriting that it takes most Jews another year to screw up the courage to return.

No comprehensive cures exist, of course. And Zionism, which is in many ways a conservative cultural
Zionism welcomes Jews through the peoplehood portal—remembering that Judaism is this entirely unique mix of nation and religion, of peoplehood and faith.

initiative despite Israel’s liberal democracy, faces a hostile environment. American Jews, whose parents and grandparents were once more culturally conservative than the rest of American society, tend now to be far more liberal. Moreover, the systematic campaign to delegitimize Zionism has done great damage, just as conservative dominance of Israel has tarnished Israel’s luster among America’s passionately liberal Jews.

Nevertheless, Israel and Zionism still have a magic, illustrated by the great counterforce that most lamentations about the Israel-Diaspora relationship overlook: Birthright Israel. Young American Jews on those 10-day trips are thrilled by the experience. The enthusiasm comes from tasting a thick, dynamic, 24/7 Jewish experience that is qualitatively different from their thin, static, fragmented American Judaism. The impact comes from what Jonathan Sacks has aptly called turning Israel into world Jewry’s classroom, its living laboratory demonstrating vibrant, thriving Jewishisms in sync with the environment. Seeing Jewish garbage men and police officers normalizes Jewish society, broadening the range of Jewish career paths and class stances, reducing the implicit pressure wherever American Jews look to be the next Zuckerberg, Spielberg, or Sandberg.

Swimming in a pool of Jewish symbols, traditions, values, and stories, Jewish pilgrims to Israel encounter an alternate universe that reveres the past, that seeks meaning beyond the material, that is more communal than individual and is more eternal than last week’s most forwarded YouTube video of cats frolicking. Israel proves Theodor Herzl right: Fitting in, not standing out, because you’re Jewish is liberating.

Even more surprising, unlike the media’s dystopic portrayal, Israelis are happy and fun-loving. Israel’s recent score of 11th on the world happiness index comes on the heels of reports about American mass unhappiness, especially in the upper-middle-class neighborhoods where American Jews live. The findings that half of Yale’s undergraduates at some point in their four years will experience severe psychological distress goes far beyond the anxiety produced by the crazy process of getting in. It suggests a specific sort of soul sickness that an elite life increasingly stripped of community, tradition, nationalism, God, group responsibility, and virtue produces. As the occasionally embattled Jewish state in an old-new land, Israel remains a Republic of Something, even as America risks degenerating into a Republic of Nothing. The shared past, purpose, and principles produce happier, more grounded, people.

Israeli normalcy risks its own laziness. But it’s the laziness of an instinctive, normalized Judaism in all dimensions rather than a Judaism you need to carve out time for, picking and choosing just what to do and when to do it—while often looking over your shoulder because you don’t want to look like a weirdo or a fanatic.

Beyond that, Zionism answers some core ideological conundrums many American Jews don’t even know how to formulate. Zionism resolves the confusion whereby the Judeo-Christian connection in America makes many nonreligious Jews feel Jewish even while calling Judaism their “religion.” Zionism welcomes Jews through the peoplehood portal—remembering that Judaism is this unique mix of nation and religion, of peoplehood and faith. Zionism celebrates nationalism as a force for good, cherishes religion and tradition as valuable anchors, providing meaningful “software” of values and beliefs running on the “hardware” of belonging. And Zionism celebrates the virtues of having red lines to respect, as well as blue-and-white lines to affirm. It “rewards togetherness,” in Anne Roiphe’s lovely phrase, and demands loyalty in many ways—especially considering Israel’s military situation.

With Judaism providing the background music to so much that is Israeli, with Israel instilling a strong sense of belonging in visitors, let alone citizens, American Jews encounter new ways of being Jewish. They see total Judaism, immersive Judaism, public Judaism. And, often without realizing it, they see a startling contrast, even with secular Israeli Jews who have figured out how to keep their kids and grandkids Jewish without being religious.

Finally, Israel helps American Jews shift from Anatevka to Jerusalem, from what Irving Howe called “the world of our fathers” to the lives of our brothers and sisters. Israeli Jewish identity is about speaking Hebrew and eating cheesecake on the holiday, often overlooked in North America, of Shavuot. It’s also, unfortunately, about fighting and defending the state.
The need for American Jews as allies in that fight continues to offer nonreligious American Jews a passionate Jewish cause, a defining Jewish mission in their lives. And judging by the fact that AIPAC’s Policy Conference is the rare mass event that parents often attend with their teenage and twenty-something children, Zionism offers something one generation can pass on to the next.

Beyond that, the excitement—and, to be sure, the frustrations—of working out Jewish dilemmas and governing problems in real time with high stakes to keep this grand Jewish national project alive and thriving, is a lot more compelling than humming “Sunrise Sunset” as you enter your synagogue.

When done right and understood properly, Zionism can offer an important clarification to all Americans, especially in the age of Trump. In the 2016 campaign, whenever the word “nationalism” appeared in the media, it often came poisoned by words like “white” or “extremist” or “xenophobic.” The reaction against Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, Brexit, neo-Nazis, and other manifestations of populist nationalism has soured too many Americans on any form of nationalism.

At its best, what might be called “liberal nationalism” infuses democratic ideals into the natural tendency for people to clump together with those like them. In the 1950s, Isaiah Berlin described this constructive nationalism as “awareness of oneself as a community possessing certain internal bonds which are neither superior nor inferior but simply different in some respects from similar bonds which unite other nations.” Many Enlightenment thinkers, following the 18th-century philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, compared this communal impulse with other human “desires” for “food, shelter, procreation, and a minimum degree of liberty.”

Today, this nationalist vision goes against the prevailing cultural tide. Amid what the sociologist Robert Bellah calls “radical individualism,” young Americans experience a “negative” process of “giving birth to oneself” by “breaking free from family, community, and inherited ideas.” By contrast, commemoration of the bar and bat mitzvah defines maturation as accepting communal responsibilities rather than shirking them. The Zionist reality demanding that young Israelis enlist in the army also roots them in communal commitments. In this view, national service is the defining step toward adulthood.

A resurrected, refreshed, Zionist conversation, one that focuses on what Israel does for us, might help Jews see liberal nationalism as a neutral tool that can unite a divided community and make us more determined, more purposeful, and more fulfilled than we can be individually—precisely what the young Arthur Hertzberg proposed seven decades ago.
The Palestinian Authority Loses Its Authority

The last remnant of Oslo crumbles

By Seth Mandel

Yasser Arafat and Bill Clinton stood in the Map Room of the White House on September 13, 1993, making awkward conversation. Two days earlier, Clinton had Arafat’s Palestine Liberation Organization removed from the State Department’s list of terrorist groups. The Map Room meeting came after the Palestinian leader’s famous handshake outside the White House with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, which inaugurated the “Oslo era.” The accords created the Palestinian Authority to serve as a sort of caretaker government tasked with making peace with Israel and building the institutions of a state, led by Arafat. Just like that, one of the most consequential terrorists of his generation became the equivalent of a head of state—before the state even existed.

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The whirlwind changes left Clinton unprepared for the meeting. Perhaps that accounts for the momentous mistake he made that day. “Rabin can’t make further concessions until he can prove to his people that the agreement he just made with you can work,” he told Arafat. “So the more quickly we can move on your track, the more quickly we’ll be able to move on the Syrian track.” Clinton thus tipped his hand: The U.S. saw an Israeli–Syrian peace deal as the real goal, and the president needed Arafat to make it happen. “Now that Arafat had used that deal to open up a relationship with Washington, he did not want to let Clinton shift his attention back to Syria,” reports Clinton foreign-policy hand Martin Indyk in his memoir. “And the more he managed to involve us in the details of his agreement with the Israelis, the less we would be able to do that. In his good-hearted innocence, Clinton had revealed his preferences. Arafat would not forget them.”

Indeed he would not. No foreign official would be invited to the Clinton White House more than Arafat. The Israeli–Palestinian peace process would not
be a mere sideshow to the wider Arab–Israeli conflict. It would be a tapeworm inside U.S. foreign policy, diverting and consuming resources. Arafat had made the Palestinian Authority the center of the world.

Twenty-five years of violence, corruption, and incompetence later, the PA lies in ruins, with the Palestinian national project right behind it. Arafat controlled the PLO for a half-century before assuming control of the new PA. Thus his death in 2004 was the first moment of serious potential change in the character of Palestinian institutions. Mahmoud Abbas, far less enamored of violence than the blood-soaked Arafat, was his successor. Rather than reform Palestinian institutions, Abbas has presided over their terminal decline. As Abbas’s own health fades and as the world again turns its attention to Gaza, the part of the Palestinian territories not controlled by him, it’s worth wondering if there is a future at all for the Palestinian Authority.

The PLO was created at an Arab League summit in Cairo in 1964 to serve as an umbrella group for Palestinian organizations seeking Israel’s destruction. It was paralyzed by intra-Arab rivalries until various factions figured out how to wag the dog and draw the Arab states into war with Israel. “Palestinian guerrilla action was insufficient to achieve liberation, and so it needed to overturn reactionary Arab governments and assist Arab unity in order to provide the power necessary to attain the ultimate objective of liberation,” writes Palestinian intellectual and historian Yezid Sayigh, describing how some within the PLO saw it. Arafat’s Fatah faction, which delayed in joining the PLO but influenced it from the outside, was more explicit in a 1965 memorandum: Arab national armies would “intervene to decide the conflict, and to bring it to an end after the revolutionary masses had prepared the way for them.”

Palestinian provocations played a part in helping to fan the flames that exploded into the Six-Day War in June 1967. Yet rather than destroy Israel, the Arab armies lost territory to the Jewish state, including the West Bank of the Jordan River. The following year, Fatah—which had by now joined the PLO—provoked a costly battle with Israeli forces in the West Bank town of Karama. Fatah lost nearly 100 fighters, but Arafat’s mad gamble paid off: The Palestinians survived a face-off with the Israeli military and demonstrated their independence from Jordan. Arafat used this failure-as-success to complete Fatah’s takeover of the PLO in 1969 and become the undisputed public face of the Palestinian guerrillas. Documents captured by Israeli forces in southern Lebanon in 1982 showed extensive training and sponsorship of Palestinian guerrillas across the Communist bloc—the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam, Hungary, Soviet-aligned Pakistan—in addition to PLO support from Arab states. After its expulsion from Lebanon in the wake of the Israeli incursion, the PLO went into exile in Tunisia.

The first intifada broke out in 1987, and even as it publicized Palestinian resistance, it gave the West a chance to consign Arafat and the PLO to irrelevance. Foreign Minister Moshe Arens proposed allowing the major Palestinian cities in the West Bank and Gaza to hold mayoral elections, after which Israel would recognize the winners as official Palestinian interlocutors. Rabin, then the defense minister, opposed the Arens plan, fearing it would undermine Israel Defense Forces’ control of the West Bank. A compromise plan was for the Palestinians in the territories to hold elections for negotiators, not officeholders. In his memoir, Arens explains that the idea “was meant to begin a process of negotiations with the Palestinians while bypassing the Palestine Liberation Organization.”

Before Arens or Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir could present the plan to the George H.W. Bush administration, Bush and Secretary of State James Baker preempted the Israelis by leaking to reporters their preference for the PLO and their belief that talks with Arafat should broach the possibility of establishing a Palestinian state. Shamir’s right-of-center Likud party revolted, and the government eventually collapsed. Bush had succeeded not only in throwing Israeli politics into chaos in the midst of the intifada, but also in effectively legitimizing Arafat as the rightful representative of Palestinian nationalism. This put the PLO and Israel on the glide path to that September 1993 breakthrough and the creation of the Palestinian Authority.

All this history taught Arafat one unmistakable lesson: Violence works. And so, after the signing of the Declaration of Principles in 1993, violence continued. Some of it was ordered by Arafat; some tacitly encouraged by him; some his...
security services merely allowed to happen. More than 250 people were killed by Palestinian terrorists in the five years after the signing ceremony. Arafat’s political rivals in Hamas pioneered the use of suicide bombings as a regular feature of terrorism. This served Arafat well: He could crack down on Hamas if and when he needed to but could also keep his fingerprints off some of the most heinous violence against Israeli civilians.

A perfect example of this double game occurred in February 1996. The Norwegian diplomat and UN envoy Terje Rod-Larsen met regularly with Arafat at the Palestinian leader’s Gaza home throughout the Oslo period. On February 24, 1996—a Saturday—Arafat asked his guest his plans for the next day. Rod-Larsen said he was thinking about spending the day in Jerusalem. According to the journalist Michael Kelly, Arafat cryptically said: “Why don’t you stay away from Jerusalem on Sunday.” The next day, Hamas blew up a bus in Jerusalem and another in Ashkelon, killing 26. “Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, who thought he had persuaded Palestinian radicals to refrain from attacks on Israelis, condemned the bombings, saying they threatened the peace process,” reported CNN that day.

Violence wasn’t the only way Arafat hindered the cause of Palestinian statehood. Corruption tore through nascent Palestinian institutions. The numbers are staggering. After Arafat’s death, David Samuels surveyed the damage for the Atlantic:

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The International Monetary Fund has conservatively estimated that from 1995 to 2000 Arafat diverted $900 million from Palestinian Authority coffers, an amount that did not include the money that he and his family siphoned off through such secondary means as no-bid contracts, kickbacks, and rake-offs.... In 1996 alone, $326 million, or 43 percent of the state budget, had been embezzled, and... another $94 million, or 12.5 percent of the budget, went to the president’s office.... A total of $73 million, or 9.5 percent of the budget, [was] spent on the needs of the population of the West Bank and Gaza.... Arafat hid his personal stash, estimated at $1 billion to $3 billion, in more than 200 separate bank accounts around the world, the majority of which have been uncovered since his death.

Why didn’t the creation of the PA result in Arafat’s transition from guerrilla leader to civilian state-builder? Three problems kept cropping up. The first was that his lack of accountability was enabled by both Israel and the United States, out of the naive belief that it didn’t matter how Arafat built his state and abided by agreements just so long as he did so. Arafat exploited this—he never built his state, in part because nobody was willing to make him.

The second problem was that the PA only added a layer of opacity to Arafat’s power structure. As the analyst Jonathan Schanzer notes in State of Failure: “Was he the chairman of the PLO, the president of the PA, or the leader of Fatah? These varying roles made it difficult to firmly establish his accountability.”

The third problem was more fundamental: Arafat shaped the PLO, and thus the Palestinian national movement, for a quarter-century before the PA was established. The only thing that changed was that nothing changed. Arafat’s predilection for violence, secrecy, and authoritarianism would be deeply corrosive to the institutions of an existing state; to a nonstate tasked with creating those institutions, they were fatal.

Not until Arafat died did the full extent of the PA’s failure become clear to all. Arafat’s absence was supposed to be cause for hope; instead, it revealed the bankruptcy of the PA’s model. Mahmoud Abbas inherited not a state but an illusion.

THERE IS NO DOUBT that Abbas was an improvement over Arafat. As Arafat’s deputy, he tried in vain to convince his boss to halt the second intifada (2000–2003), a bloody campaign of violence instigated by Arafat after he turned down Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak’s offer of a Palestinian state at Camp David in 2000. The intifada sapped Israelis’ faith in the PA as a negotiating partner and delivered Likud’s Ariel Sharon—the godfather of Israel’s settlement movement and a man who, as defense minister, had been instrumental in driving the PLO out of Lebanon two decades earlier—to the prime minister’s office.

Abbas’s ascension left policymakers in Jerusalem and Washington playing Weekend at Bernie’s with the corpse of the Palestinian Authority, waving...
its arms and propping it up in public. Both wanted to show the Palestinians they could get more with honey than with vinegar. But by 2004, it didn’t really matter. With President George W. Bush’s backing, Sharon went forward with plans to pull Israel completely out of Gaza and parts of the West Bank. The “Disengagement” of 2005 was a political earthquake: Israel’s great champion of the settlers uprooted thousands with no concessions from the Palestinians. More important, perhaps, was the fact that it was unilateral. How much did the PA even matter anymore?

Abbas’s legitimacy was another nagging problem. Though he won a presidential election in 2005, the PA was haunted by the ghosts of Arafat’s corruption. In 2006, Abbas called for legislative elections. Confident of victory, he permitted Hamas to participate in the elections, and the U.S. didn’t object. Had his Fatah party won, its legitimacy would have been undeniable. But in a shock, Hamas won. Fatah was hobbled not only by the perception of Arafat’s venality but also by the consequences of his one-man rule. In their biography of Abbas, Grant Rumley and Amir Tibon write: “Palestinian legislative elections are essentially a local election, in which every ‘district’ chooses its own members of parliament from the different political lists. While Hamas’s candidates ran under one banner, Fatah showed disastrous disunity by having splinter lists in multiple camps, towns, and villages.” Civil war engulfed the Palestinian territories. Hamas took control of Gaza and was booted from the government in the West Bank. Abbas is now in the 14th year of his four-year term.

His legitimacy in tatters, Abbas went about consolidating power and cracking down on dissent. But it wasn’t just the democratic deficit that made Abbas’s reign resemble his predecessor’s. The courts, legislative institutions, education, civil society—Palestinian state-building simply wasn’t happening. In 2010, the Carnegie Endowment’s Nathan Brown studied Palestinian government and society under Abbas’s Western-educated prime minister, Salam Fayyad, and he came to a dispiriting conclusion: “There was far more building of institutions under Yasser Arafat than there has been under Fayyad. It is true that many institutions were built in spite of Arafat and that Fayyad’s behavior suggests a greater respect for rules and institutions. But that is consolation only for those who mistake personalities for politics.”

Yet in one way Abbas is arguably more dangerous than his predecessor. Arafat was notoriously defensive about possible successors because he had created an entire system centered on his role as the Indispensable Man. Nonetheless, PLO bylaws made Abbas the rightful successor, and he remained the consensus choice.

But to say Abbas has failed to claw back any control over Gaza would be an understatement. With a bevy of foreign benefactors—among them Turkey, Iran, and Qatar—no pretense of democracy, and no easy way in or out, the strip has become a Philadelphia-sized Islamist police state. Every few years, Hamas instigates a war with Israel to remind the world that no degree of physical isolation can make it irrelevant.

On March 30, the group organized the first so-called “March of Return,” a day of protest and mischief at the border with Israel in which 20 Palestinians were killed in clashes with Israeli troops. A top Hamas official said the marches will continue until they succeed in overrunning the border and driving the Jews out of the land. For this, the protests were rewarded with absurd media devotions; the New York Times hyped a Palestinian analyst’s comparison of the border rushes to the civil-rights protesters trying to cross the Edmund Pet- tus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, in 1965. Hamas displays the organizational control Abbas can only dream of, and the ability to have its propaganda amplified by the Times, CNN, and other major media across the globe. Abbas is reduced to gritting his teeth, and lately seems ready to just give up, telling Egyptian interlocutors in early April that unless Hamas turns over “everything, all institutions and ministries, including security and weapons,” the Palestinian Authority “will not be re-

The succession battle could get bloody very fast. The PA as an institution survived Arafat’s death. It may not survive Abbas’s.
proxy fight among Arab states, it could get bloody fast. The PA as an institution survived Arafat’s death. It may not survive Abbas’s.

There is, of course, one remaining way for Abbas to distinguish himself from Arafat and ensure that he leaves something tangible behind: He could take yes for an answer and actually seek a negotiated settlement. Sadly, his track record here isn’t any better. In 2007, he walked away from a generous Israeli offer by Sharon’s successor, Ehud Olmert. The 2008 U.S. election briefly appeared to vindicate him—Barack Obama was elected president and proceeded to browbeat Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu into giving away the store. But Abbas made a fool of Obama, too. At first, he sat back and played for time. Then, seeing how difficult Obama was making life for Netanyahu, he thought he could wait for Netanyahu’s government to crumble. When Obama left office in 2017, Netanyahu was still prime minister. The one time negotiations got anywhere, in 2014, Abbas blew them up by abruptly agreeing to bring Hamas into the government, a move that cannot be countenanced by the U.S. or Israel as long as Hamas remains committed to terrorism and refuses to abide by existing agreements.

Obama did two other things that backfired on the Palestinian Authority. One was the Iran nuclear deal, which gave tacit American support to Tehran’s expansionism in the Middle East, scaring Sunni regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Egypt into strategic alignment with Israel. The other was more subtle but just as consequential: He helped orchestrate the passage of a UN Security Council resolution that deemed East Jerusalem, home to Judaism’s holy sites, occupied Palestinian territory.

The UN resolution at first seemed to be a clear gift to Abbas. But in reality, it was a ham-handed attempt to tie the hands of President-elect Donald Trump, who would be taking office just a month later. Trump wouldn’t have it. In the first year of his presidency, he publicly declared Jerusalem the capital of Israel and announced that his administration would move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. (While a new embassy compound is being built, the White House plans to officially designate the existing consulate in Jerusalem as the embassy in time for Israel’s 70th anniversary celebrations on May 14.)

The Jerusalem moves have been an unmitigated humiliation for the PA. They undid the damage to the U.S.–Israel relationship inflicted by Obama. Worse for the PA, Trump called the Palestinian bluff. Contrary to the fears of Western observers, and the ill-disguised morbid hopes of some in the media, the region did not go up in flames. The “terrorist’s veto” did. And the coordination that such a move required between the United States and its Arab allies made crystal clear just how isolated the Palestinian Authority has become—how vulnerable it is to the politics of the Arab world, and how impervious to Palestinian politics the Arab world has become.

It took four decades, but the dog is once again wagging the tail.
ULIA KRISTEVA, one of the world’s most celebrated intellectuals, has long pronounced herself the enemy of all totalitarianisms. The Bulgarian government now tells a different story: that Kristeva—today a commander of both the French Legion of Honour and the Order of Merit, winner of the Holberg International Memorial Prize (she often is identified as a winner of the Vaclav Havel Prize, which is inaccurate), and a visiting professor at Columbia University—was an agent of the Communist-era intelligence apparatus, the fearsome Committee for State Security, which worked hand-in-glove with the KGB. Sofia released documents in March detailing the desultory career of the agent code-named “Sabina,” who helped keep the Communist authorities apprised of the actions of Bulgarian expatriates, Maoist intellectuals, Palestinian activists, and others.

Kristeva categorically denies the charges. Her critics argue that it is unlikely that the Bulgarian government would fabricate an 80-page dossier for the purpose of embarrassing a 76-year-old academic who is of no particular contemporary political importance. Professor Richard Wolin of the CUNY Graduate Center, who has written extensively about Kristeva, says flatly: “She’s lying.” And he adds that the Bulgarian government’s claims about her did not materialize ex nihilo: Kristeva recently began writing for a Bulgarian journal, and Bulgarian policy is to publish the dossiers of public figures who had served the state intelligence agencies during the Communist era. That policy is carried out by “ComDos,” the Committee for Disclosure of Documents and Announcement of Affiliation of Bulgarian Citizens to the State Security and the Intelligence Services of the Bulgarian National Army.

But what Kristeva did or did not do in secret is if anything less troubling than what she did in public. For decades, she lent her intellectual prestige and her powers as a writer (and propagandist) to some of the most repressive and vicious regimes of the second half of the 20th century. And she did so as someone who had first-person experience with real-world socialism as it was practiced in what was arguably the single most suffocating regime in Eastern Europe.

Kevin D. Williamson is a writer based in Texas.
Kristeva was an enthusiastic supporter of the French Communist Party, the most servile of all the Communist parties in Europe, indulging Hitler when it suited Moscow.

ONCE inescapable on college campuses (I was assigned readings from her work in at least four different classes in the 1990s), Kristeva has faded a little: She has authored a number of novels that have not been generally well-regarded, and she has got on the wrong side of her fellow feminists by criticizing the subjection of the individual identity to the demands of identity politics. She belongs, with Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes and a few others of that kidney, to an era of postmodernist excess during which American academics aped the jargon-heavy (and famously unreadable) prose style of their Continental idols, especially the French ones. Discipline and Punish took on the totemic status later enjoyed by Capital in the 21st Century—which is to say, a book with many more owners than readers, A Brief History of Time for Reagan-era graduate students. Revolution in Poetic Language might not have generated quite as much awe as Foucault’s famous lump, but The Kristeva Reader ornamented a great many coffee tables—and who could resist “Experiencing the Phallus as Extraneous”?

Kristeva arrived in France in 1965 on a research fellowship. She soon moved from the École normale to the Sorbonne, and she studied under Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan, taking in the intellectual fashions of her time: psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, semiotics, feminism, and, of course, radical left-wing politics. Indicting midcentury French intellectuals for covert or overt support of Communist dictatorships around the world is like writing speeding tickets at the Daytona 500, but Kristeva’s political history and that of the journal with which she was long affiliated, Tel Quel, is a remarkable testament to the weakness of Western intellectuals for totalitarianism—provided it is dressed in sufficiently exotic trappings—careering from Marxist-Leninist to Stalinist to Maoist. Kristeva was an enthusiastic supporter of the French Communist Party, arguably the most servile of all of the Western European Communist parties, indulging Adolf Hitler when it suited Moscow and later justifying the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 as a necessary prophylactic against “counterrevolution.” There was no Communist outrage too great for Tel Quel, whose editor, Philippe Sollers (Kristeva married him in 1967), declared in the familiar language of the period his opposition to all things “counterrevo-

utionary” and advertised his allegiance to “Marxist-Leninist theory, the only revolutionary theory of our time.” V. I. Lenin was later displaced from the Tel Quel intellectual pantheon by Mao Zedong. Professor Wolin, an intellectual historian, tells the story in his 2017 book Wind from the East:

As a result of the May [1968] events and their contact with the Maoists, French intellectuals bade adieu to the Jacobin-Leninist authoritarian political model of which they had formerly been so enamored. They ceased behaving like mandarins and internalized the virtues of democratic humility. In May’s aftermath, they attuned themselves to new forms and modes of social struggle. Their post-May awareness concerning the injustices of top-down politics alerted them to the virtues of “society” and political struggle from below. In consequence, French intellectual life was wholly transformed. The Sartrean model of the engaged intellectual was upheld, but its content was totally reconfigured. Insight into the debilities of political vanguardism impelled French writers and thinkers to reevaluate the Dreyfusard legacy of the universal intellectual: the intellectual who shames the holders of power by flaunting timeless moral truth.... The Maoists started out as political dogmatists and true believers. But they soon found it impossible to reconcile their pro-Chinese ideological blinders with the emancipatory spirit of May. Once they ceased deluding themselves with revolutionary slogans, they began to understand politics in an entirely new light. The idea of cultural revolution was thereby wholly transformed. It ceased to be an exclusively Chinese point of reference. Instead it came to stand for an entirely new approach to thinking about politics: an approach that abandoned the goal of seizing political power and instead sought to initiate a democratic revolution in mores, habits, sexuality, gender roles, and human sociability in general.

There was a substantial intellectual component
Her advocacy of the most murderous regime of the 20th century is only one tessera in the great mosaic of Western intellectuals’ seduction by totalitarian systems.

to the Maoism of the Kristeva-Sollers set, but there was also a superficial one: Sollers began affecting the Maoist mode of dress, and Kristeva, one of the most important feminist thinkers of her time, dutifully authored articles in defense of Chinese foot-binding, which she described as a form of feminine emancipation. Calling to mind Senator Elizabeth Warren and her fictitious “Cherokee princess” ancestor, Kristeva boasted that she is a woman who “owes my cheekbones to some Asian ancestor.” Despite having almost no facility with the Chinese language and very little knowledge of its culture, she authored a widely read and translated book, About Chinese Women, in which she made unsupported claims about the “matrilineal” character of classical Chinese culture. Tel Quel adopted an editorial line that was uniformly and cravenly pro-Mao, even going so far as to argue that the absence of professional psychiatric practice from China resulted from the fact that Maoism had delivered the Chinese people from “alienation,” the traditional Marxist diagnosis for what ails the capitalist soul, rendering professional mental-health care unnecessary.

“I don’t fault her” for serving the Committee for State Security, Professor Wolin says. “It was the most repressive dictatorship in Eastern Europe.” Signing on to inform for the Bulgarian government might well have been a condition for Kristeva’s being permitted to study in France in the first place, and she had vulnerable family members still living under the Bulgarian police state. “I don’t know why she doesn’t come clean,” he says.

But that is not the end of her story. “What I do fault her for is jumping on the Communist bandwagon,” Wolin adds. First she served the interests of Moscow and then those of Chairman Mao. Unlike most of her French colleagues, the Bulgarian expatriate was in a position to know better from direct experience. Nonetheless, Kristeva and the Tel Quel set undertook a pilgrimage to Maoist China in the middle 1970s, where they saw the usual Potemkin villages and came home to write fulsome encomia to the wisdom and efficacy of the Great Helmsman. “By ’74, everybody knew that the Cultural Revolution was a power play and a debacle on every level,” Wolin says, an excuse for the Chinese authorities to purge their rivals. “People who had been sent down wrote memoirs, and those were published in French in 1971 and 1972.... Kristeva knew how repressive these regimes were. She didn’t have to celebrate Communism. No one compelled her to do that.”

If this were only a question about a Bulgarian-French intellectual who is obscure beyond academic and feminist circles, then it would be of limited interest, one of those French intellectual scandals that give Anglophone writers and academics a twinge of envy. (When was the last time there was a truly national controversy in the United States over a book? The Bell Curve?)

But Kristeva’s advocacy of what was in terms of gross numbers the most murderous regime of the 20th century is only one tessera in the great mosaic of Western intellectuals’ seduction by totalitarian systems, especially those that come wearing exotic costumes. (Jeremy Jennings, writing in Standpoint, describes Kristeva’s Maoism as “part radical chic, part revolutionary tourism, part orientalism.”) Sometimes, that seduction has come from the right, as with Italian Fascism’s ensorcelling of Ezra Pound and F. A. Hayek’s embarrassing admiration for the government of Augusto Pinochet, a political crush that earned him a private rebuke from no less a figure than Margaret Thatcher. But, more often, that seduction has come from the left: Lincoln Steffens returning from the Soviet Union to declare, “I have seen the future, and it works.” Walter Duranty’s embarrassing misreportage in the New York Times, which still proudly displays the Pulitzer prize earned thereby. The moral equivalence and outright giddy enthusiasm with which Western intellectuals ranging from the left-wing to the merely liberal treated Lenin and Stalin. The New Republic’s footsie-playing with Communists under Henry Wallace. Noam Chomsky’s dismissal of the Cambodian genocide as an American propaganda invention. The reverence for Fidel Castro. The embrace of Hugo Chávez by everyone from Hollywood progressives to Democratic elected officials. Chants of “Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh / The NLF is going to win!” on the streets of New York in 1968. Ten million Che T-shirts.

“There are Western intellectuals who don’t succumb,” Professor Wolin says. “The George Orwells, Susan Santags, and others who learn the lesson. Among the French leftists in the late 1960s who swooned for the Cultural Revolution, many of them came to their
senses in the ’70s.” But what about those who are seduced? “Often, they’re naïve about politics, and they project holistic and idealistic solutions—totalizing solutions—onto events that don’t admit of those kinds of solutions.”

Political ideologies tend to define themselves in two important ways: first, in opposition to the most important and prominent of their direct ideological competitors; second, in an effort to distinguish themselves from immediately adjacent ideologies and factions. In the case of 20th-century radicals such as Julia Kristeva, the enemy was capitalism, and the most prominent alternative to capitalism was Communism. Whether the pursuit of the idealized new man and his utopian new society took the form of old-fashioned bureaucratic Soviet socialism or the more rambunctious and anarchic mode of the Cultural Revolution was a dispute between adjacent factions, something that may seem almost immaterial from the outside but that is the source of all-consuming passions—and rage—inside the radical milieu.

The West is perversely fortunate that its hedonism and materialism have inoculated it against the premier radicalism of the early 21st century—jihadism, which has gained very little purchase in the West outside of poorly assimilated immigrant communities, mostly in Europe. But Islamic radicalism is not the only rival to democratic liberalism on the world stage: As Xi Jinping consolidates his position in Beijing (a project that goes far beyond the recent removal of the term limits that would have ended his rule at the conclusion of his second term), where are the Western intellectuals with the moral authority and political acumen to articulate a meaningful critique of what he represents? The left in Europe and in the English-speaking world has never been obliged to make an accounting—or a reckoning—for its indulgence of a far more dramatically violent expression of Chinese nationalism, and even liberal technocrats such as Thomas Friedman dream of turning America into “China for a day,” begrudgingly admiring the Chinese government’s raw ability to simply act, unencumbered by democratic gridlock.

And if the left and the center-left are ill-equipped to mount an intellectual defense of democratic liberalism, the right is even less prepared, having mired itself deeply in the very kind of authoritarian nationalism practiced by Beijing. Like the 20th-century left, the 21st-century right has gone looking for allies and inspiration abroad, and has settled upon Russian strongman Vladimir Putin, the fascist Le Pen political dynasty in France, Alternative für Deutschland, neo-nationalism, neo-mercantilism, and ethnic-identity politics. The right-wing populists of Europe do not have Mao’s practically unbounded scope of action (or his body count), but they play for intellectuals on the radical right the same role that Maoism once played for intellectuals on the radical left.

It is not clear that Kristeva has learned very much from her political errors, or even indeed that she ever has come to understand them genuinely as errors. Her alleged collaboration with the Bulgarian secret police, tawdry as it might have been, would not constitute the greatest of those errors. But it is that allegation, and not the plain facts of her long career of advocacy on behalf of inhumane political enterprises, that embarrasses her. In that, she is typical of the radical tendency, a spiritual cousin to the Western progressives who once winked at Stalinists as “liberals in a hurry.” But radical chic is not an exclusively progressive fashion. Xi Jinping is in a hurry, and so is Marine Le Pen, and both have their attention set on matters of more consequence than “intersectionality,” the matter of who uses which pronouns, and the other voguish obsessions of our contemporary intellectuals.
Good as Goldberg

Suicide of the West: An Essay on the Meaning and Destiny of Liberalism
By Jonah Goldberg
Crown Forum, 464 pages

Reviewed by Adam Rubenstein

The problem of liberalism...is essentially the problem of a surviving rhetoric and a crumbling philosophy.” Those words were written in this magazine in 1952 by Irving Kristol. “This,” he added, “is also the problem of conservatism.” Kristol’s assertions 65 years ago suggest that the crises afflicting both tendencies have been a recurring feature in American politics and Western democracies in general. Their eternal recurrence should be a comforting thought—it suggests there is nothing new under the sun and that we can cope with our problems. But Jonah Goldberg believes their return in our day threatens the endurance of the 300-year explosion of prosperity and freedom in the West that he terms “the Miracle.” That is the argument he makes in his ambitious, engrossing, and provocative new volume, Suicide of the West.

In Goldberg’s telling, “the Miracle” dates to the revolution in thought engendered by the 17th-century English philosopher John Locke, who “held that the individual is sovereign; that our rights come from God, not government [and] that the fruits of our labors belong to us.” Locke believed that the best in human nature could be encouraged and the worst outsmarted through a new type of government. This was a massive break from previous ideas about governance. Indeed, Goldberg believes that Locke’s ideas, and the Miracle in general, are in a deep sense “unnatural.” In Goldberg’s view, other regimes—monarchy, tyranny, and authoritarianism generally—were and are more natural to humans, which is why they’ve dominated mankind for most of history.

But with the advent of Locke’s ideas and their textual and intentional incorporation in America’s Founding, “the mental switch had been flipped.” Individual liberty became the desideratum. The Founding Fathers took the path Locke had charted and domesticated Hobbesian natural man. This flipping, which accompanied the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism, provided fertile ground for America’s great advancement, one unparalleled in human history. Goldberg’s fear is that pre-Lockean tribalism in its current form, identity politics, challenges this advancement and American liberal democracy one fracture at a time. So too does populism, which aims to seduce through the airing of grievances rather than the replacement of bad policy by smart policy.

What made American democracy so successful was not just capitalism, due process, or the checks and balances of the Constitution, but our collective belief in them and the Lockeian values that undergird this conviction, Goldberg tells us. And now we’ve begun to forget our Constitution—not just.
the parchment (that, too), but our actual, physical makeup. “If we don’t teach people to hold what they have precious,” Goldberg says, “they simply won’t bother defending it against those who think that what we have is evil. Just as the spoiled children of the wealthy are ungrateful for the opportunities provided by their parents, we as a society are ungrateful for our collective inheritance.”

This ingratitude isn’t merely skepticism of the American project. It’s most often the result of rejecting its history and values. And those doing the rejecting have (often unconsciously) adopted the view of man promulgated half a century after Locke by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau held that man is at liberty until he enters the entanglements of human society: “Man was born free, but everywhere is in chains.”

The way to reassert the primacy of pre-social man, he who is “uncorrupted,” is to bring him back to his natural tribal state. At this moment, the purest expression of this drive in America is the push for identity politics, which pervades the halls of our universities and the centers of our culture. But not all identities are created equal. There are, Goldberg points out, academic departments devoted to “Whiteness Studies.” While disciplines like Black Studies or Women’s Studies are “dedicated to the project of building up an identity, celebrating its uniqueness, and cultivating, essentially, a sense of nationhood,” the opposite is the case with “Whiteness Studies.” It is “dedicated to cataloging the illegitimacy and even the evil of whiteness.” It’s this cauldron of didactic despair that leads prominent thinkers to claim, as Georgetown University’s Preston D. Mitchum does, “Yes, ALL white people are racist. Yes, ALL men are sexist. Yes, ALL cis people are transphobic. We have to unpack that. That’s the work!” To Mitchum, we are no longer individuals with sovereignty over our minds and souls, as Locke would have it; rather, we are the products of the prejudicial convictions of others.

These views are not open to disagreement or dissent. In the minds of their proponents, they are unsailable truths. The assault on their untruths, however, is one of the things that makes Goldberg’s book so thrilling. He writes fluidly about these modern encumbrances. Take for example: “When activists say ‘if you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem,’ they are saying there’s no haven in the culture, no rights of exit from the agenda of ‘social justice.’” This line of thinking, apart from its totalitarian circularity, basically presupposes its own conclusions. It insists that there is a problem, that one must agree that the problem is indeed worthy of a solution, and that the solution that’s been devised is incontrovertibly right; otherwise, “you’re part of the problem.” It’s like the “no justice, no peace” slogan. If you presuppose an injustice, you are within your brief to hold peace hostage until the perceived injustice is rectified in the eyes of the self-appointed victim. Indeed, the liberal order itself is held hostage. Forget truth and a reciprocal understanding of natural rights. Muscle and coercion are what matter most—a clear reversion to pre-social man. Heaven forbid the expression of a different view, even from a member of a group that the left privileges.

The practitioners of identity politics—and their alt-right counterparts on the other side—exploit liberalism for their own will to power. And it’s easy for them do so, especially in a liberal system. Identity politics, among other forms of resentments of the American system, finds such a strong voice in a liberal democracy because it is liberal and tolerant of dissent. And so, as Goldberg writes, those who challenge the liberal system can “get away with a lot of illiberal theatrics and demands.” The challenge for us is “to figure out how much [we] can tolerate before the forces of illiberalism corrod[e] the liberal order.”

Liberalism’s weakness, its openness, is also its strength. It has created the wealthiest and freest country in the history of mankind. But there are those who have lost faith—and those who are, whether by intention or accident, destroying it. Goldberg concludes that the Miracle “happened in America by choice.” It was created by choice and so it can die by choice all the same. That is a path to suicide, and we had better change course. The splendid Suicide of the West charts a course to save us from this unnecessary self-destruction.
ROSS DOUTHAT has written perhaps the most important Catholic book in the era of Pope Francis, which began in 2013. To Change the Church is thoughtful, penetrating, and graced with an ironic touch and gentle humor. It is also terribly difficult for a faithful Catholic to review, as it is acutely critical of the pope. A disclaimer, then: Pope Francis is a holy man, for Catholics his teaching authority is infallible, and nothing contained here should be taken for filial impiety or disloyalty.

Yet as Douthat notes, the principal duty of a Catholic isn’t to the pope but “to the truth the papacy exists to preach, to preserve, and to defend.” There is reason to worry that lately a spirit of relativism has entered the Roman Church that threatens to undermine its unity and catholicity. That should concern Catholics and non-Catholics, because the Church is the living bedrock of the West and one of the last bastions of the principle that moral truth is moral truth yesterday, today, a thousand years from now.

That the Church is in the throes of some sort of crisis is apparent even—Douthat would say especially—to non-Catholics and the secular media. Lately not a week goes by without some news breaking from the Vatican that jarringly calls into question the stability of Church dogmas.

The latest was an Italian journalist’s claim that the pope had told him that hell doesn’t exist. The journalist, Eugenio Scalfari, is 93 and known for impressionistic reportage; not for him are the recorders and notebooks that most reporters use to ensure the accuracy of quotations. The Holy See Press Office rushed to clarify that the purported remarks were not “a faithful transcription.” It is true that Francis has repeatedly reaffirmed Church teaching on hell and the devil. The question is why he continues to grant interviews to the atheist reporter; the “hell” interview was Scalfari’s fifth with the vicar of Christ in as many years.

For Douthat, the Scalfari interviews are typical of a papacy that thrives in ambiguity. The aim, he says, is to “keep the church together” even as Francis pursues a project of deep liberalization. The author devotes most of the book to exploring the origins of this project and then weighs its merits, prospects, and meaning at a moment of worldwide ideological ferment. The verdict: The Francis way of change is sharpening the Church’s internal antagonisms, radicalizing the conservative opposition, and undoing the great promise of his pontificate.

Douthat, best known for his columns in the New York Times, begins by sketching three histories of the past 50 years in Church life. First, he takes up the view of liberal Catholics, those who saw the Vatican II reforms first promulgated in 1965 as God’s invitation to remake the Church in the image of liberal modernity. The council, liberals hoped, would dismantle male-dominated hierarchy, shelve Latin liturgy, and do away with moral precepts about divorce, contraception, and homosexuality that ignored the “lived experience” of the faithful in the 20th century.

There was some progress in this direction in the decade after the council. But then came the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, from 1978 to 2013, long years that, in the eyes of the liberals, saw Rome betray the conciliar commitment to a broad, modern, “bottom-up” Catholicism. John Paul—era conservative Catholics begged to differ, and Douthat next takes up their view. They believed that the council had implemented essential reforms—embracing freedom of conscience and denouncing anti-Semitism, above all—but that Vatican II didn’t authorize the disruptive changes pressed by its most ardent fans. The results of those disruptions were, to the conservative mind, empty pews, collapsing vocations, and a flight from Catholic truth and beauty. That is, until John Paul reversed the worst of these trends, quashed heterodoxy, and helped defeat Soviet Communism along the way.

I subscribe to this second account, and so does Douthat mostly, though he finally tries to present a balanced third story. It goes like this: The conservative camp was right to warn of “dissolution and decline” under the liberal model. But too often the conservatives were stuck in a defensive lurch. Their reaction sufficed to halt the drift toward liberal Protestantism. Yet they couldn’t rout theological liberalism for good—not least because Vatican II texts were vague enough to accommodate liberal dreams—and the Church remained
mired in its post-conciliar squabbles by the time Benedict abdicated in February 2013.

Enter Francis. The first Jesuit to take the office, he vowed to look beyond the old divide. As he told the conclave that elected him, “the self-referential Church keeps Jesus Christ within herself,” and it was time for the Church “to come out of herself.” Conservatives and liberals both heard things they liked in these words. The hope was that the Argentine pontiff would end the Vatican II wars. Five years later, however, the ecclesial culture war is more heated, more bitter, and more parlous than it ever was under John Paul or Benedict.

What happened?

It turns out that “outreach” under Francis entailed a frontal assault on conservatives. True, the pope also inveighed against a “Gnostic” form of purely private religion that sounded a lot like liberal Catholicism. But he reserved his harshest words for a supposedly “rigorist,” “legalistic,” “elitist” faith steeped in Latin ritual. Young people attracted by the splendor of the Latin Mass were “rigid.” Priests who preferred traditional vestments and regalia were effeminate. To his right, Francis saw only scribes and Pharisees.

Never mind that, as Douthat notes, conservative Catholics are largely powerless in the wider culture, while the liberals have the support of the “entire mainstream post-1960s culture.” Never mind, too, that it is conservatives who have sustained Catholic parishes and vocations in many parts of the world. No matter. Popes are allowed to part ways with their predecessors in style and emphasis. And some, though by no means all, Catholics on the traditionalist end of the spectrum could be cranky and prone to weird politics, a phenomenon that long predated the Francis papacy.

Conservatives could shrug off these insults and still cheer many things about the pope. He was (and remains) rock-solid on abortion and other dignity-of-life questions. He was (and remains) a withering critic of gender ideology and the transgender agenda. And his critique of the “throwaway culture” of capitalism was in deep continuity with Catholic social teaching.

But then came the “marriage problem,” as Douthat calls it, the controversy that has consumed the Francis papacy and plunged the Church into what may be its most serious theological crisis since the Reformation.

Douthat does yeoman’s work untangling the debate, which goes to the heart of Catholic beliefs about morality, papal authority, and Jesus himself. The question is whether remarried Catholics may receive holy communion. For two millennia, the Church answered no, based on Jesus’s clear teaching that marriage is a divine sacrament and therefore indissoluble. Rome had preferred to lose England than give in to Henry VIII over this very issue.

But in 2014, the liberal German cardinal Walter Kasper laid out his proposal, long blocked under John Paul and Benedict, to create a “pontifical path” for the divorced and remarried that would allow them to be admitted to communion. He did so at a meeting of cardinals—and at the invitation of the pope. Kasper insisted that his suggestion wouldn’t change the Church’s position on divorce. The point, he said, was to find a solution for those among the divorced and remarried who are in tough or complex situations and could use a pastoral path back to the altar.

The cardinal’s protests notwithstanding, this meant radical change. The Church’s obstinacy on divorce, Douthat argues, is “a study in what makes Catholicism’s claim to a unique authority seem plausible.” Yes, in practice, many remarried Catholics receive communion. But the failure to uphold a principle is no argument against it. If the Church adopted Kasper’s view, it would in effect imply that Christ’s words had been unclear; that for two millennia Rome had been under a misapprehension. Kasper’s proposal would also telegraph that the moral law is too hard to follow in some cases, a view that the Church has consistently opposed: “God does not command what is impossible,” said Saint Augustine. Worst, it would stretch papal authority to the breaking point, since Francis would be going against his immediate predecessors.

Now, to be clear, Pope Francis has never formally endorsed communion for the divorced and remarried. What he has done is issue a long apostolic exhortation, Amoris Laetitia (“The Joy of Love”), with a single ambiguous footnote that could be interpreted as authorizing communion for the remarried in a narrow set of cases. The narrowness and ambiguity gave conservatives hope that the more revolutionary interpretations could be, well, interpreted away.

The pope didn’t stop there, alas. He has used a number of non-magisterial forums—not least interviews with the aforementioned Signore Scalafari—to suggest that he intends to go the whole hog with Kasper. When conservative cardinals posed a series of dubia, or queries, asking him point-blank whether the prohibition still stands, the pope first ignored and then ridiculed them. Today some bishops interpret Amoris to abrogate the old teaching while others maintain the traditional position, with the disconcerting result that Catholic truth shifts depending on where the faithful live.

The most aggressive liberals are framing the single footnote as Vatican ratification for full-spectrum progressivism. Everything is suddenly
up for grabs, from the Church’s rule against artificial contraception to blessing same-sex unions to offering last rites at euthanasia clinics to the veracity of the Gospels. A cadre of social-media-savvy liberal priests, meanwhile, push theology just to the line of heresy, to the glee of the secular press and with the apparent approval of their superiors. Meanwhile, conservative critics of the pope find themselves sidelined and sometimes jobless.

Where will all this lead? Douthat has no definite answers, but he engages in some fascinating speculation. The liberals simply don’t have the numbers. The European heartlands of theological liberalism are in demographic decline, and liberal orders struggle to attract vocations. Church coffers may be full, but the pews are empty. The leading lights of theological liberalism are octogenarians, and there are no successors in the wings.

Conservatives and traditionalists, meanwhile, have the numbers, the intellects, the energy. Orders that prize tradition and orthodoxy are thriving worldwide. In population terms, Africa is a beacon of hope for conservatives, a continent where weekly Mass attendance averages 70 percent (compared with just 20 percent for Europe) and where the Church wins 9 million new believers each year. African Catholicism is pungent and conservative, and African fecundity means that liberalism is octogenarians, and there are no successors in the wings.

The grim upshot, then, is that the Catholic civil war is likely here to stay. More relevant to non-Catholics, it also means that what Douthat describes as the John Paul/Benedict “synthesis” between modernity and tradition might be slipping away. That synthesis more or less made the Catholic peace with liberal democracy, but it also called on liberal democracies to honor their Judeo-Christian roots and safeguard the moral culture that is the precondition for rights-based self-government.

Now some orthodox Catholics are wondering if the two conservative popes conceded too much to liberal order. “If the conservatism of John Paul and Benedict led only to Francis,” they think (in Douthat’s telling), “perhaps it didn’t conserve enough.” At its worst, such pessimism leads conservatives to defend to the hilt every ill-advised and cruel ruling of pre–Vatican II popes—especially if those rulings touched upon the sacramental life of the Church, which they perceive to be under threat from Rome today.

But the desire for ordered continuity can take other forms, and I find myself yearning with Douthat for a new Catholic center, “one that would offer a Christian alternative to the aridity of secularism, the theocratic zeal of Islamism, and the identity politics of right and left.” To my mind, Pope Francis at his best still embodies that center. When he embraces the horribly deformed, when he invites a child with Down syndrome to sit next to him, when he comforts hardened men in prison and reduces them to tears, Francis makes visible the supernatural guarantee on which his office rests. He is Peter, and the gates of Hades will not prevail.

Catholics can and must disagree with the pope when truth is at stake. They don’t have to like every pope. But they cannot afford to doubt the guarantee lest they doubt the Guarantor.

The Israel Basher

The Wall and the Gate: Israel, Palestine, and the Legal Battle for Human Rights

By Michael Sfard
Metropolitan Books, 528 pages

Reviewed by Gerald M. Steinberg

In September 2001, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights held a major conference in Durban, South Africa, ostensibly to mark the end of the apartheid regime. But the event, and particularly an “NGO Forum” attended by 5,000 delegates, was hijacked and turned into what some participants termed an anti-Israel and anti-Semitic carnival. In the final session, the leaders of the NGO Forum announced a plan to transfer the tools used in the anti-apartheid campaign to the dismantling of Israel, declaring the nation-state of the Jewish people guilty of apartheid, ethnic cleansing, and war crimes.

Since Durban, a small but generously funded army of ideologues has sought to implement this strategy, seeking to persuade governments (particularly European) and international institutions, such as the International Criminal Court,
Michael Sfard is among the most energetic, passionate, and articulate warriors on this battlefield. As an Israeli fiercely opposing the policies of his own nation, he automatically gains credibility among some audiences. Over many years, he has waged war in the Israeli courts and, more important, in arenas around the world that specialize in anti-Israel campaigns.

Sfard’s weapon is international law—a nebulous, plastic, and readily manipulated commodity that has the feel and texture of real law (as practiced by lawyers and judges in individual nation-states), without the constitutional backbone.

His book *The Wall and the Gate* is a polemic, and there are no shades of gray or self-doubt. At no point does Sfard ponder complexities and contradictions, such as the absence of universality or reciprocity—two essential dimensions of any legitimate legal system. Thus, he glosses over the daily human-rights violations and war crimes committed by his “clients,” as he paternalistically refers to Palestinians, repeating the standard victimization myths. His references to the horrors of terror that have taken so many Israeli lives are minor and parenthetical. For example, in condemning the Israeli separation barrier that has prevented many terrorist attacks, he says, “there will come a day, maybe when the conflict is over, when Palestinians will be unable to escape the duty to reckon with some of their organizations’ tactics.”

In 528 pages of detailed legalese, with numerous footnotes and references, primarily to court cases, Sfard manages to cover a very narrow spectrum of reality. He offers no solutions to the conflict, because international law on its own cannot resolve anything. The mass labeling of Israeli political leaders (who, unlike Sfard, were elected) and military officers as “war criminals” is neither moral nor productive.

The publication of the book in English rather than Hebrew reflects Sfard’s emphasis on persuading outsiders to help him impose his agenda on Israel. Readers likely to be convinced by this volume include those who already agree with him (including European officials who have provided Sfard’s law office and associated “human-rights organizations” with substantial taxpayer funds over the years), and others with one-dimensional views based on maps that begin at the Mediterranean and end at the Jordan River. Iraq, Iran, Syria, al-Qaeda, and the rest do not exist in Sfard’s imaginary Middle East. The unstated assumption behind this book and Sfard’s legal crusades is that the only issue that matters is the post-1967 “occupation,” which must end, regardless of what comes after.

His main argument begins with a chapter on “deportations”—the focus of the first legal battles challenging the occupation policies, beginning in the late 1970s. At the time, and particularly during the first Rabin-led government in 1976, Israel sought to deport PLO leaders involved in incitement and violence, such as Abu Awad, Mustafa Natshe, Bassam Shaka, and others. Their defenders Felicia Langer and Leah Tsemel, who were Sfard’s role models, are portrayed as talented legal technicians—manipulating an archaic legal system, outmaneuvering government lawyers, and persuading judges who ruled strictly according to their understanding of the law. The issues of war and peace, of terror attacks and real people being ripped apart—Israeli lives and families destroyed in unspeakable evil—are conveniently erased. Throughout the book, Israeli Jews are the all-powerful Other; the victims of Palestinian terror are nameless, without families or mourners. Only Palestinian victims, real and constructed, are given the dignity of being named.

Sfard dismisses the complex legal and political challenges in this and other chapters by facile references to the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention (prohibiting civilian population transfers in situations of occupation), and again highlighting Sfard’s simplistic interpretation of international law. He views these instruments not only as unambiguously binding (ignoring conflicting interpretations, laws, and principles), but more important, as a means of leveraging international pressure in order to force Israel to change its policies.

Thus, he notes: “The international debate over the prohibition set down in Article 49...ultimately had an effect.... The claim that Israel is violating a convention signed after World War II whose purpose
is to prevent humanity from committing war crimes against civilians could not be more troubling.” Far more troubling, however, is Sfard’s exploitation of these agreements to weaken Israel’s ability to address terrorist violence directed at its civilian population.

As he moves from one topic to the next, and from decade to decade, we can see how what began as the legal and political crusade of a few individuals became a major industry. The Association for Civil Rights in Israel (ACRI) was one of the first nongovernmental organizations involved, followed by Hamoked, B’tsellem, Yesh Din, Breaking the Silence, Adallah, and others—all seeded by the New Israel Fund. European governments then multiplied the grants and resources to Sfard’s network, thereby promoting their policies, prejudices, and interests. On the sensitive issue of foreign funding for what are essentially opposition advocacy groups operating without democratic checks and balances, Sfard is unusually silent. His successes with major donors gave a major boost to his own prestige, influence, and financial status, including the grant from the Open Society Foundations (George Soros) that enabled him to write this book.

Legal battles over settlements are the focus of another lengthy chapter, in which political processes, elections, Knesset debates, security considerations, and other dimensions are erased from the background. On this crucial issue, democracy and the system of checks and balances between different branches of government are deemed irrelevant. From this perspective, determination of land ownership (an extremely murky topic, involving Ottoman, British, Jordanian, and Israeli laws) and related issues are determined strictly by the skills of the lawyers arguing the cases on the side Sfard supports. No wonder that Israelis—for whom questions of borders, security, and the right to live and build in ancient Jewish sites are central—are not comfortable when these and other issues are decided by a narrow legal fraternity.

The chapter on the separation barrier follows the same template, accompanied by some particularly egregious propaganda. In a one-paragraph summary of the origins of this strategic innovation, Sfard repeats the slogans and myths of the so-called second intifada. Arafat’s terror wave, in which more than 1,000 Israelis were brutally murdered, is falsely attributed to Ariel Sharon’s decision to reassert Jewish rights after the Palestinians used violence to close the Temple Mount.

Among many omissions in this tome, the absence of any reference to Richard Goldstone stands out. In 2009, Judge Goldstone agreed to head the Commission of Inquiry into the Gaza warfare that was established by the UN Human Rights Council. In the spirit of the 2001 Durban NGO Forum, the Commission’s absurdly biased mandate was to find evidence of Israeli war crimes, which they did, as reflected in their report. Afterward, Goldstone—who had served on the South African court in the transition from apartheid—belatedly realized that he had been massively deceived. Sacrificing his career, he courageously denounced the report that bore his name, acknowledging that its legal and factual claims were unsupported. Michael Sfard and the NGO network that he founded were among the main sources of this infamous document.

As the book concludes, Sfard focuses on one hero in particular—Michael Sfard. Citing experts such as John Dugard, the UNHRC’s special rapporteur on the Palestinian Occupied Territories (whose words of praise are included on the book’s jacket cover), Sfard chronicles his dubious successes. The anti-terror barrier was transformed into a “photojournalistic disaster” due to his efforts, he claims. Dugard, it should be noted, has been condemned by the Geneva-based UN Watch as “a disgrace” whose “see no evil” approach to Palestinian terror contradicts each of the UN Policy Working Group’s criteria for UN reporting on terror: clarity, principle, unacceptability of terrorism, and dissuasion.” Praise from Kenneth Roth, the leader of Human Rights Watch and another obsessive Israel-basher who, like Sfard, is funded by George Soros, is also featured on the book jacket. No buyer can say he wasn’t warned.
The Longer Angels of Our Nature

The most celebrated American play of our time is back—at length

By Terry Teachout

WHEN Tony Kushner’s Angels in America: Millennium Approaches opened on Broadway a quarter-century ago, it became the most talked-about theatrical event of its day. It brought Kushner a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony, and that Tony was followed by another when its second half, Angels in America: Perestroika, opened six months later. Taken together, the two parts of Angels in America—running seven-and-a-half hours in all—were widely thought to constitute the most important American play of the late 20th century. Now it has returned to Broadway in a production from the National Theatre in London, where it was greeted with near-universal acclaim, much of it from critics who were not yet born when the real-life events depicted by Kushner took place.

The inception and reception of Angels have been chronicled in The World Only Spins Forward, a book-length oral history compiled by Isaac Butler and Dan Kois.* Based on interviews with 250 people who took part in or saw its early productions, it documents the impact that Angels had on its first viewers. One of them, Ben Brantley of the New York Times, observes with only minor exaggeration that “Angels brought theater back into the national conversation.” So it did, if only for a time.

Its immediate success was in part a result of its then-salient subject matter, the AIDS crisis, as well as the unprecedented frankness with which Kushner portrayed gay life (and sex) on stage. The question that arises from the revival is this: Is Angels in America really the masterpiece that nearly everyone quoted in The World Only Spins Forward believes it to be? Does it measure up to such American classics as The Glass Menagerie and Long Day’s Journey into Night? Or might it best be understood less as

* Bloomsbury, 437 pages
a living work of art than as a document of its fast-receding historical moment?

PART OF WHAT MAKES this question hard to answer is that Angels is unlike any other American play previously thought to be of enduring value. That Kushner unapologetically presented homosexuality not as a dramatic problem but as a normal part of the human condition was by no means the only thing that sets Angels apart from its predecessors. Not only is its extreme length daunting, but it is also an intensely political play, one whose characters include fictionalized versions of Roy Cohn, Joseph McCarthy's one-time protégé, and Ethel Rosenberg, in whose execution Cohn played a key role. In addition, Angels is an all-encompassing amalgam of realistic and anti-realistic elements (several of its scenes are elaborate portrayals of AIDS-related hallucinations) whose language ranges from kitchen-sink naturalism to extravagant flights of quasi-poetry.

What, then, made Angels in America so popular? It helped that it was a political play, one whose triple-barreled message was that there is nothing wrong with homosexuality, that the Republican Party is “a polestar of human evil,” and that the AIDS crisis would come to an end. Rarely have playwrights gone far wrong by telling audiences what they want to hear, and New York theatergoers have a history of supporting sufficiently entertaining shows that wear their liberal politics on their sleeves.

But Angels is, fortunately, more than that—a nontraditional but nonetheless conventional domestic drama, the story of two couples whose lives intersect by chance and are disrupted beyond repair. The central plotlines are as tightly intertwined as those of a traditional “well-made” play. Joe Pitt, a Mormon man married to Harper, gives in to his suppressed homosexual urges and embarks on an affair with the radical leftist Louis. Louis, in turn, has been emotionally wrecked by the fact that his partner, Prior, has AIDS. All this roots Angels in a time-honored theatrical structure.

At the same time, its Shavian subtitle, “A Gay Fantasia on National Themes,” points to Kushner’s intention to make it much more. Hence the presence of Cohn, the AIDS-afflicted archvillain of Angels, as well as the fact that Joe is not merely a closeted gay man but Cohn’s protégé, a conservative religious Republican. Hence, too, the climactic hallucination scene, in which a despairing angel reveals to Prior that it is man’s tragic destiny to succumb to “the slow dissolving of the Great Design.” Prior rejects this fate, preferring to devote what is left of his life to what he and the angel refer to as “the Great Work.”

And what is this “Great Work”? Kushner evidently has in mind the coming of the millennium of progressive politics, a secular faith whose goals are the full acceptance of homosexuality and the advent of democratic socialism: “We won’t die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward....That’s what politics is. The world moving ahead. And only in politics does the miraculous occur.”

Angels in America, then, is not merely political but ideological, a work of art shaped by its author’s deep sympathy for Marxism. “I make [the] most meaning of the world,” Kushner said in 2004, “when I read the history and ideas of any number of great socialist thinkers, including Karl Marx.” In the same interview, he called Stalinism “the worst thing that ever happened to a great idea.” And whether or not he believes that the triumph of that idea is historically inevitable, his view of history is fundamentally Marxian. In a recent Los Angeles Times interview, he made the following statement:

I’m a big believer in identity politics and political correctness. Why shouldn’t we want to be politically correct, if by correct you mean not toeing the party line but toeing the line of history, being on the right side of history, being moral and ethical.

It is this iron certainty that “history” has a “right side” that makes Angels so attractive to many latter-day progressives. They are as sure as Kushner of their own rectitude—and as quick to demonize those who fail to toe the lines they draw. The overwhelmingly positive critical response to Marianne Elliott’s neon-lit, self-consciously “relevant” Broadway revival, in which
we are meant to think “Donald Trump” whenever we hear “Ronald Reagan,” suggests as much.

Therein lies the first of Kushner’s two main weaknesses as a playwright—his failure to portray his ideological enemies with the total imaginative sympathy of the truly great artist. No compromise is possible: They must be unambiguously annihilated, even as Roy Cohn is annihilated by Ethel Rosenberg’s triumphant exit line (she calls him a “sonofabitch” after saying the Kaddish over his still-warm corpse). Angels would be a richer play if Kushner had had both the wit and the honesty to portray her as shamelessly guilty. And the second half would have been improved had he acknowledged, even in passing, that the perestroika of Mikhail Gorbachev, of whom brief but prominent mention is made, was enabled by Ronald Reagan, the dark god at whose altar Cohn worships.

Kushner’s other weakness is his defective sense of aesthetic proportion. For him, longer is always better. (His play Homebody/Kabul begins with a monologue that lasts 90 minutes.) The extreme length of Angels is one of the things that those who love it most affect to admire about it, but in fact it would be a vastly better play were it vastly shorter.* But while Angels is conceptually gargantuan, it calls for a cast of just eight actors, which means it can be produced on a modest scale without feeling cramped or constrained. Moreover, it profits from the spatial compression imposed when it is mounted in a small house. When Angels is done that way, as was the case with Signature Theatre’s 2010 off-Broadway staging, its strongest features come to the fore, in particular the domestic scenes that are the best things about the play. Angels is never more poignant—or more believable—than when it depicts the breakdown and disintegration of the fragile romantic relationships that lie at its heart.

It is especially gratifying that Kushner portrays Harper, Joe’s pill-popping wife, as a tortured, lonely young woman whom Joe has kept in the dark about his homosexuality, and who is thus as much a victim in her own way as is the AIDS-infected Prior (and as are all straight spouses of closeted gays who have deserted or deceived them for similar reasons). Another writer might have treated Harper as a mere prop, an unfortunate obstruction standing in the way of Joe’s self-actualization, but Kushner lets the viewer feel the raw hurt of her plight. No scene is more affecting than when she deliberately burns Joe’s dinner, then demands that he confess his secret, in the process making a shocking admission of her own: “You think you’re the only one who hates sex; I do; I hate it with you; I do. I dream that you batter away at me till all my joints come apart, like wax, and I fall into pieces.”

Gratifying, too, is the way in which themes of high seriousness are frequently treated by Kushner with a light touch. Angels is genuinely funny, and its surprising lightness of touch helps to enliven Cohn, who in real life was altogether unfunny. In Angels, however, he is quite outrageously funny, never more so than when he musters the gallows chutzpah to deny that he is homosexual after his doctor tells him he has AIDS:

I have sex with men. But unlike nearly every other man of whom this is true, I bring the guy I’m screwing to the White House and President Reagan smiles at us and shakes his hand. Because what I am is defined entirely by who I am. Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, Henry, who f— around with guys.

*See my essay “Tony Kushner’s Characters Should Stop Talking Now” (Commentary, July/August 2011).

Does ALL THIS place Angels in America in the canon of classic American plays? I think it unlikely that it will be as admired a half-century from now as it is today. It is noteworthy how many younger viewers, gay and straight alike, already regard Angels as a period piece. A gay millennial director recently told me that it means no more to him than The Boys in the Band, Mart Crowley’s once-scandalous 1968 play about a group of unhappy gay friends, which is itself about to be revived on Broadway. “I’m a lot more interested in plays about what gay life is like right now,” he explained.

Nor does its tacit portrayal of the AIDS crisis as a problem mostly affecting white men sit well with certain of today’s progressives. One of them, Steven Thrasher, recently published an essay in which he condemned Angels for “its terrible racial politics...Angels in America gentrifies blackness out of the American AIDS story.” For the true-blue leftist, it seems, no one—not even Tony Kushner, notwithstanding his ardent belief in identity politics and political correctness—can be pure enough.

If Angels in America does last, it will surely be as a history play, one in which directors and actors of the future find enduring truths that speak to their own condition and stage it in ways suggestive of intergenerational parallels. This may well happen, for Angels’s virtues outweigh its flaws. Still, it is so compulsively garrulous that I cannot watch it (and I have seen it four times) without longing
Every Last Detail

The Perfectionists: How Precision Engineers Created the Modern World
By Simon Winchester
Harper, 432 pages

Reviewed by
John Steele Gordon

James Watt’s steam engine sent the Industrial Revolution into overdrive by providing a source of cheap, abundant, work-doing energy. But before it could do so, there was a big problem to solve: the need for precision. Unless the diameter of the cylinder exactly matched the diameter of the piston, either the piston would jam or much of the energy would be lost as the steam escaped around its edge.

Precision was a new concept in the mid-18th century. Indeed the very word had entered the English language only in 1740, when Watt was four years old. Before then, complicated mechanisms were made by hand by craftsmen who shaped each piece until they fit together.

Watt found the answer with James Wilkinson, remembered as iron-mad Wilkinson for his obsession with the metal (he was even buried in an iron coffin, which he had kept in his office). Until Wilkinson, cannons had been cast hollow and the tube up which the cannon ball roared was often eccentric. This could either produce thin spots in the cannon, causing it to fail and killing the gun crew, or it might allow much of the energy to escape around the ball. Wilkinson’s solution was to cast the cannon solid and bore out the center.

When that technology was applied to Watt’s cylinder, Watt was delighted with the result. “Mr. Wilkinson,” he wrote, “has bored us several cylinders almost without error; that of 50 inch diameter... does not err the thickness of an old shilling at any part.” The width of an English shilling was one-tenth of an inch, and with that level of precision, the world could now change.

Simon Winchester, the author of many books, including the major bestseller The Professor and the Madman, about the creation of the Oxford English Dictionary, has written a fascinating tour through the ever increasing precision that has marked the modern world, from Wilkinson’s 0.1 inch to a modern computer chip, which has spaces of only 0,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,01 inch between its 7 billion transistors.

In the 18th century, locks were poor and thieves numerous. Joseph Bramah wanted to do something about that, and he did. In 1790, he put in the window of his shop in Piccadilly a single padlock. Inscribed on the lock was a pledge: “The Artist who can make an Instrument that will pick or Open this Lock, shall receive 200 guineas The Moment it is produced.” Two hundred guineas in 1790 was a middle-class annual income. But despite the considerable incentive, it would be 61 years before anyone successfully picked the Bramah lock, and it took that locksmith 15 hours to do it.

Joseph Bramah was a highly creative man, inventing among other things the flush toilet, the fountain pen, and, crucial for heavy industry, the hydraulic press. But for his lock to be made in large quantities and at a low enough price to be widely in demand, he needed a means of manufacturing it cheaply. To do so, he hired an 18-year-old named Henry Maudslay, who would turn out to be one of the most significant figures in the early history of the Industrial Revolution.

At this time, the usual method to increase production was to hire many highly trained artisans who would create each item individually. That wouldn’t do this time, and Maudslay’s solution was to invent the machine tool, a machine...
that built machines (or, in the case of a lock, a mechanism). With these new machines, the various parts could be made quickly and with far greater precision than when crafted by hand. And they could then be fit together with minimal adjustments. For with the fully evolved mechanical lathe, an essential part of Maudslay’s new machine tools, it was possible to achieve precision of up to 0.0001 inch, 100 times as precise as Wilkinson’s cannon borer.

This substitution of machine for men had consequences, as Winchester demonstrates with the pulley block. Pulley blocks were the devices that sailing ships used to manipulate the rigging, trimming, raising, and lowering of the sails. They were needed in vast numbers, as many as 1,400 on a first-rate warship such as HMS Victory. In all, the Royal Navy needed 130,000 pulley blocks a year. And they all had to be made by hand.

In 1801, Marc Brunel (father of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the greatest engineer of the 19th century) secured a patent on block-making machinery and proposed to the navy to create a factory. Brunel went to Maudslay to actually build the needed machinery.

Maudslay produced 43 machines in all, each performing one or more of the 16 separate tasks that “transformed a felled elm tree into a pulley block.” The Royal Navy built a huge brick building at the navy base at Portsmouth to house them.

So well made were these machines that most were still working a century and a half later, in 1965, when the Royal Navy produced its last pulley block. But before that factory (the first one in the world to be powered entirely by steam), more than a 100 highly skilled workers were needed to supply the blocks. After it was built, no more than 10 moderately skilled men were needed to run the machinery. Brunel was richly rewarded for his work, with the amount of money the Royal Navy saved in one year: £17,093, a fortune by the standards of the early-19th century. The skilled workers, however, were now unemployed. Machines replacing men would have great political and economic ramifications and drive much of the domestic politics of industrializing countries.

One of the most fascinating chapters of this endlessly fascinating book is on the development of an intricate and ultra-precise technology that many of us regularly entrust our lives to, the jet engine.

Propeller-driven airplane engines have severe limitations. Their speed is limited by the fact that the propeller tips cannot move faster than the speed of sound without generating severe turbulence.

And the reciprocating engines that drive propellers are mechanically complex, the parts having to reverse direction thousands of times a minute. An Englishman named Prank Whittle had a better idea.

As a mere Royal Air Force cadet in the 1920s, he had written a paper entitled “Future Developments in Aircraft Design.” “The engine of the future,” he declared, “must produce 2,000 horsepower with one moving part: a spinning turbine and compressor.” He wanted to use the basic principle of the turbine engine, which drives a ship’s propeller, to compress air, ignite the fuel, and send the exhaust at very high speed out the back of the engine, providing thrust. (The turbine engine, which had revolutionized ship propulsion beginning in the 1890s, had been invented by the great 19th-century engineer Charles Parsons, who is, inexplicably, unmentioned by Winchester.)

Jet engines (which today can generate up to 100,000 horsepower) are, indeed, mechanically simple, at least in one sense. But their one moving part has to operate flawlessly in the middle of, quite literally, a firestorm, as the fuel combusts around it. This calls for not only precision, but exquisitely delicate engineering to assure that the engine materials do not reach temperatures at which they would begin to distort and fail.

In a jet engine, parts made of metal must operate in temperatures beyond the melting point of that metal. This is accomplished with a cooling mechanism of fantastic precision and complexity that allows the rotor blades to operate surrounded by a layer of cool air less than one millimeter thick.

Winchester shows how sensitive this work is with the example of a near-disaster in 2010, when a Qantas A380 super-jumbo jet took off from Singapore, headed to Sydney. Shortly after takeoff, the plane’s number-two engine exploded, severely damaging many of the systems needed to control flight. Only some very fancy flying by the highly competent crew allowed the plane to return safely to Singapore.

A blade of one of the rotor discs had failed, causing the whole rotor to self-destruct. The reason, uncovered after three years of painstaking investigation, was that a small pipe had been machined improperly, resulting in a small portion of its circumference being about a half a millimeter too thin. Over time, that proved nearly fatal, and the lives of 469 people suddenly hung in the balance.

Simon Winchester is a born storyteller, and he has an uncanny eye for the fascinating if slightly extraneous fact (the footnotes are a joy). Moreover, he has a remarkable talent for explaining complex technical matters in language that the well-educated layman can easily understand. To put it simply, The Perfectionists is an absolutely wonderful, illuminating book.
In a June 23, 2014, article for DefenseOne.com headlined, “A Victory in the Battle Against Mass Destruction,” Joe Cirincione of the Ploughshares Fund declared confidently, “Syria’s operational chemical weapons arsenal is no more.” But the arsenal used in subsequent attacks seemed pretty operational to those on the receiving end who died or were sickened.

To be sure, Cirincione also noted, “there are lingering questions and concerns—including possible undeclared weapons and facilities still to be destroyed—but the United States, using a negotiated agreement, an international network of inspectors, the involvement of some 30 nations, and an initial threat of the use of force, has just wiped out one of the two largest remaining chemical weapons arsenals in the world.”

Except, you know, not.

Even though Obama and his supporters parenthetically acknowledged that the deal with Syria depended in large part on the good faith of the Baathist regime—always a bad idea—they were nonetheless determined to play up the transfer of chemical weapons as a significant achievement. To do otherwise would have undermined the logic of the president’s foreign policy, which privileged negotiated settlements and concessions over hard power.

So, for example, on June 28, 2014, the New York Times editorial board clucked that Obama’s critics “have been proven wrong.” Why? Because “the chemical weapons are now out of the hands of a brutal dictator—and all without firing a shot.” The following month, Secretary of State John Kerry did not bother to couch his language when he said on Meet the Press, “We struck a deal where we got 100 percent of the chemical weapons out.”

After the Sunday show had ended, the fact-checking website Politifact.com reviewed Kerry’s claim. “Kerry said all of Syria’s chemical weapons had been removed,” wrote Jon Greenberg.

The UN body in charge said that the last of Syria’s declared chemical weapons left the country in late June. There remain, however, some discrepancies in the details of the weapons the Syrians had acknowledged possessing, and some additional work is needed. With that qualification, we rate the claim Mostly True.

Pretty big qualification!

The August 18, 2014 New York Times carried a piece headlined, “Syria’s Chemical Arsenal Fully Destroyed, U.S. Says.” It began with the following paragraph: “The United States said Monday that it had completed the destruction of the deadliest chemical weapons in Syria’s arsenal, a rare foreign policy achievement for President Obama at a time when the Middle East is embroiled in violence and turmoil.”

On August 19, 2014, Steven Benen, a blogger for Rachel Maddow, wrote a post called “A big win on Syrian chemical weapons.” “When Obama and U.S.-coalition partners reached this agreement, critics assumed the framework would fail and the president would be humiliated by the inevitable failure,” Benen argued. “As it turns out, the opposite has happened—the Obama administration's policy has worked.”

On December 6, 2016, Obama bragged, “We’ve eliminated Syria’s declared chemical weapons program.” But eliminating declared programs does not matter if an undeclared program exists—as Assad demonically revealed in 2017 when he used chemical weapons to attack a town in northern Syria.

Even after the deal was exposed as a farce, however, Obama’s friends were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. On April 7, 2017, a New York Times headline read, “Weren't Syria's Chemical Weapons Destroyed? It's complicated.” Scott Shane reported, “Despite the failure to completely eliminate Syria's chemical weapons, Obama administration officials and outside experts considered the program fundamentally a success.”

Defending a policy he did so much to create, and attacking President Trump’s decision to enforce a red line his boss had ignored, Obama deputy Ben Rhodes tweeted on April 9, 2017, “Strikes could not have ended the violence in Syria or removed all of the CW [chemical weaponry] which was destroyed through diplomacy.” Care to revise that statement, Mr. Rhodes?

Not every Obama official is as blinkered and coooned as Rhodes, however. Also last spring, an article in the New York Times quoted Tony Blinken, former national-security adviser to Vice President Biden. “We always knew,” Blinken said, “we had not gotten everything, that the Syrians had not been fully forthcoming in their declaration.”

Now they tell us. ➤
ON APRIL 7, Syrian government forces, backed by Russia and Iran, used chemical weapons to attack the population of Douma, a rebel-held town in the hotly contested province of Eastern Ghouta. Dozens of men, women, and children were killed, and many more were made grievously ill.

I spent a few hours after the attack rereading the ludicrous coverage that greeted President Obama’s announcement in 2013 that, rather than take military action, he had entered into an agreement with the Russians to remove and destroy Assad’s chemical stockpiles. The Obama administration knew at the time that the deal would leave Assad plenty of armaments, but officials were happy nevertheless to make statements that left the public with a different and mistaken impression. These statements were often lawyerly, sophisticated, and deceptive, using weasel-phrases like “declared chemical weapons.” They assumed that the everyday voter would not recognize that the word “declared” signified a loophole Assad could drive a tank through.

What followed was a dress rehearsal for the Iran nuclear deal of 2015: The agreement was bad and not subject to congressional oversight or approval, the media happily retailed the Obama administration’s message, and now that we are dealing with the fallout in lives and lost credibility from a bad deal deceptively marketed to the public, no member of the Obama-media echo chamber wants to be reminded of his colossal misjudgment and credulity.

Let’s remind them.

The Russians proposed the chemical-weapons deal on September 9, 2013. The following day, before any agreement had been reached, Vox.com editor-at-large Ezra Klein tweeted, “I can’t believe the White House’s strategy on Syria is working out this well. I doubt they can either.”

The plaudits only increased after a deal was reached on September 14. Before a single weapon had been removed, MSNBC anchor Alex Witt asked a guest, “Doesn’t President Obama actually come out the big winner here ultimately? Because without firing a shot, you said you believe that Syria will get rid of its chemical weapons.” On November 4, deputy national-security adviser Ben Rhodes tweeted a link to a White House report with the slug, “Read more on how additional chemical agents or munitions cannot be produced in Syria.”

Assad began transferring weapons to international authorities in the summer of 2014. As liberal pundits and journalists celebrated this supposed victory of diplomacy, they made sure to include caveats allowing that Assad and the Russians—perish the thought—might be lying. A June 23, 2014, article at the left-wing ThinkProgress.org was headlined, “Nobody Thought Syria Would Give Up Its Chemical Weapons. It Just Did.” And while the article cautioned, “There’s a chance that Syria may also have not declared all of its chemicals to the international community,” it did not dwell on that idea for long.

That same evening, Rachel Maddow announced on her MSNBC show: “The chemical weapons are gone.” She interviewed foreign-policy gadfly Steve Clemons, who called the deal “an enormous success for the White House.” Clemons went on, “had we attacked at that point and not had the leverage to get Syria to give up 1,300 tons of chemical agents, those chemical agents would still be there.” That’s true: The Syrians no longer had the weapons they agreed to hand over. They just had all the weapons they kept instead.
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