THE DEMOCRATS ARE GOING CRAZY

> NOAH ROTHMAN
> ABE GREENWALD
> JOHN PODHORETZ

NIKKI HALEY AT THE U.N.
JON LERNER

THE MERITOCRACY BLUES
CHRISTINE ROSEN

Beginning This Month: Rob Long’s Hollywood Commentary
SAVE THE DATE

The 10th Annual COMMENTARY ROAST OF BEN SHAPIRO

will take place on Monday, September 16, 2019, New York City

The Roast is a benefit to support COMMENTARY INC., the nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization that publishes Commentary Magazine.

For information on tables and tickets, contact Stephanie Roberts at sroberts@commentarymagazine.com
A Few Things of Note

JOHN PODHORETZ

WITH THIS ISSUE, we inaugurate two new monthly features. First, replacing our Media Commentary column that begins on our last page, we will now present Hollywood Commentary—an inside look at the machinery of American popular culture by the veteran TV writer-producer Rob Long, with whom I share a twice-monthly podcast called GLoP Culture along with Jonah Goldberg.

Our Media Commentary columnist these past five years, Matthew Continetti, has shifted gears and departments and will now write our monthly Washington Commentary. He succeeds Andrew Ferguson, who has decamped for a staff writing position at the Atlantic.

You will also find in this issue a new monthly entry we’re calling Cultural Commentary. It’s a two-page compendium of recommendations of books, services, films, and TV shows we like and wish to commend to your attention, written by the magazine’s staffers. The first Cultural Commentary includes favorable notices on a book about therapy, a collection of short stories, a Netflix movie, a free streaming-video service for people with library cards, and a compelling investigation of the disappearance of Malaysian Airlines Flight 370. You can find it on page 15.

Christine Rosen, who has been writing our Social Commentary column since December 2015, has joined our staff full-time as a senior writer, working out of Washington. She joins Noah Rothman as one of our two daily bloggers, has become a regular member of our podcast crew, and will write longer articles in the magazine in addition to her column.

Now look to your left at the announcement on the facing page for our 10th annual Commentary Roast with the victim of 2019, Ben Shapiro.

This 35-year-old pipsqueak has just published The Right Side of History, a prodigious small volume that takes us on a tour of Western thought—and as of press time, Ben’s book has sold in excess of 100,000 copies. He’s got millions of YouTube viewers, podcast listeners, Twitter followers...let’s face it, someone who seems to triumph at everything ought to be taken down a peg or two just to keep him honest. Our roast, on September 16 here in New York, will be phenomenal. You should come. You should buy a table and bring your teenage kids. We need you. It’s our only fundraiser of the year. Contact Stephanie Roberts at sroberts@commentarymagazine.com to learn more.

Over the coming months, we’ll be doing some renovations at our website, www.commentarymagazine.com, to make it more aesthetically pleasing. But this is all probably enough change for the moment. We are conservatives, after all.
A decade in the wilderness is leading to some bizarre policy proposals.

Our politics is now characterized by fights over problems that don’t quite exist.

The forces driving Democrats to distraction.

The West’s most successful politician scores again.

The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations stood up to the most powerful anti-Israel organization in the world.

Saving the Nordics from the Mongrels

The Guarded Gate, by Daniel Okrent

Israel and the Illiberal Liberals

The Lions’ Den, by Susie Linfield
## Politics & Ideas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sohrab Ahmari</td>
<td>Man of Evin, <em>Prisoner,</em></td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jason Rezaian</td>
<td>by Jason Rezaian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Culture & Civilization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Terry Teachout</td>
<td>Henrik Ibsen, Part 2</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>He invented realistic theater, and now he bores. Why?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barton Swaim</td>
<td>Unfree Radical, <em>My Father Left Me Ireland,</em></td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>by Michael Brendan Dougherty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Monthly Commentaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Editor's Commentary</th>
<th>Washington Commentary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John Podhoretz</td>
<td>Matthew Continetti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Few Things of Note</td>
<td>Let's Praise Ourselves for the Worst Reporting of the Decade!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reader Commentary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on the March issue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Commentary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Christine Rosen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Meritocracy Blues</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hollywood Commentary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rob Long</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Moguls Who Couldn’t Deliver the Goods</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
To the Editor:

IN CLAIMING THAT the United States is exceptional and justified in its expansionism, John Steele Gordon writes that the U.S. “did not seek or acquire any additional territory as a result of [World War II]” (“What Makes America Exceptional,” March). This is at best simplistic and at worst baldly false. While the initial intentions of the U.S. may not have reflected expansionist spirits, the result in the Pacific was a massive expansion of America’s territorial commitments under its own terms.

This U.S. did this both in the South Pacific and the East China Sea. The country, through action in Kwajalein, Enewetak, Peleliu, Saipan, Tinian, and the surrounding waters stripped the Japanese Empire of its possessions under the South Pacific Mandate of the League of Nations. It then immediately legitimized its control as the administrator of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands under the United Nations, of which the U.S. is a permanent Security Council member and which Japan did not join until December 1956. The U.S. also established the United States Military Government of the Ryukyu Islands after the Battle of Okinawa, one of the most hard-fought battles of the Pacific theater. This organization was succeeded by the United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands, which lasted until 1972, and the ongoing Marine presence on the island.

Furthermore, a portion of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands has evolved into the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, a United States–organized insular area represented by a delegate in the US House of Representatives. The U.S.’s complicated and difficult reckoning with its own composition is only impeded if there is not an understanding of the full expanse of the country.

Samuel W. Biddle
Annapolis, Maryland

John Steele Gordon writes:
REGARDING Samuel W. Biddle’s objections, yes, the Northern Marianas are now U.S. territory (all 179 square miles of them—about
Regime Change and Nationalism

To the Editor:

MAY I OFFER two comments on Michael Mandelbaum’s excellent “In Praise of Regime Change” (March), in which he points to the three states that disrupt global peace—Russia, China, and Iran—and calls on changing their regimes?

First, Mr. Mandelbaum calls the invasion of Ukraine, attempts to control the South China Sea, and dominance in four Arab capitals “aggressive nationalism”; but would these not better be called imperialism? More broadly, is not aggressive nationalism always imperialism, that is, ruling foreign peoples? This distinction is important to keep in mind.

Second, Mr. Mandelbaum is too reticent when it comes to what the U.S. government might do to turn these autocracies into democracies, offering the rather insipid trio of containment, weakening them “at the margins,” and Americans providing an “attractive counter-example.”
What he does not mention is challenging the legitimacy of the tyrannies and perhaps aiding their enemies. China and Russia would have to be handled with great delicacy, but Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin need to be put on notice that they cannot with impunity attack others, that doing so can exact a price in terms of legitimacy and stability.

Iran, in contrast, would be easy to check, due to its unrelenting hostility to the United States (symbolized by the slogan “Death to America”). Imagine what a boost to the mullahs’ myriad enemies American political and especially material support would be. Imagine, too, how this would frighten those mullahs. After 40 years of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it is time for Washington to call for a change in regime.

DANIEL PIPES
Middle East Forum

Michael Mandelbaum writes:
I THANK DANIEL PIPES for his two very interesting comments. As to the first, I refer to the foreign policies of Russia, China, and Iran as examples of aggressive nationalism because the three regimes justify these policies to their target audiences—the people they undemocratically govern—by basing them on nationalist sentiment. Evidence of this is the fact that, as I note in my new book, The Rise and Fall of Peace on Earth, all three assert (falsely) that the policies in question are defensive in nature, undertaken to protect their countries from the allegedly rapacious designs of the West, led by the United States. They claim, that is, that their nation is in danger. Still, imperial considerations are relevant in all three cases: Each dictatorship also justifies its foreign policies as necessary efforts to restore its country to its rightful dominance of its home region, which, if achieved, would come against the wishes and at the expense of its neighbors. Moreover, China and Iran are multinational states from which the minority nations might well choose to secede if given the opportunity; and Russia was recently the core of the world’s largest multinational empire, the Soviet Union, which Vladimir Putin sometimes seems committed to re-creating.

As for more forcefully challenging the legitimacy of the dictatorships, I see two potential difficulties. First, the dictatorial governments would surely portray such efforts as actual attacks on the nation, rather than the regime, and might thereby succeed in bolstering their own power at home. Second, the allies that the United States requires for successful campaigns of this kind might well decline to take part. Alarmed though they are at Russia’s and China’s aggressive conduct, the Europeans and especially the East Asians are reluctant to do anything to jeopardize their commercial ties with these two countries. That said, the three do have one particular vulnerability that could be more productively exploited than is now the case. The rulers of Russia, China, and Iran are all deeply corrupt. The democracies can and should do more to publicize and spell out the details of this corruption and change the Western policies that inadvertently support it, an issue on which the Washington-based Kleptocracy Initiative is doing important work.

NADINE SHATZKES
Great Neck, New York

To the Editor:
I THOROUGHLY APPRECIATED Sharon Goldman’s sharp insight into the incompatibility of intersectionality and Zionism (“Jews Must Not Embrace Powerlessness,” March). She is right to note that the point of ideological contention between the movements is the progressive rejection of any representation of power. Zionism’s success in the establishment of the State of Israel and its endurance in the face of endless threats do not fit the cult-of-the-victim mold.

The incompatibility between Jewish social-justice activism and Zionism was the invention of the ideology of Tikkun Olam. When Tikkun Olam replaced traditional Judaism as the religion of cosmopolitan American Jewry, it replaced the chosenness of the Jewish people as represented in Zionism with the shallow moral righteousness of leftism. As long as the dogma of intersectional victimhood remains the core ideology of the left, Zionists who believe in the God-given right of the Jewish people to the land of Israel, and who support its Jewish character and security, will have no home on the left.

Letters : May 2019
who promote intersectional ideology. Like all religions, intersectionality offers a vision that animates and attracts its followers. For example, Zionism will always carry a sense of “chosenness.” Something or someone, a superior being, has selected a people and called them forward. That a people were chosen and then called, and thus made special, is an insult to the intersectional social-justice cult. Their utopia arises not from being chosen but from being inflicted upon.

The conflict that Goldman writes about is not a meager quarrel about politics, but a manifestation of serious theological discordance. The different heavenly visions of these groups are irreconcilable. It is from this theological perspective that one begins to sense the dangers within the intersectional social-justice cult. Thus, the need for meekness in our times. Please note, I use meekness in its biblical sense, meaning power that is controlled and used wisely. It is not the Jewish people alone who need such meekness, but all people who cross paths with this odious cult that hides under a mantel of benevolence. I thank Sharon Goldman for a phenomenal piece.

Father Nicholas Blackwell, O. Carm.
Bronx, New York

Jews and Original Sin

To the Editor:

In his Jewish Commentary column “American Karni,” Rabbi Meir Y. Soloveichik states that Judaism denies the doctrine of original sin (March). This is perhaps not entirely accurate. In the ritual of kapparot, the fowl to be used is specific to the sinner who is seeking absolution. A man must use a rooster while a woman must use a hen. Interestingly, a pregnant woman uses two hens as she recites “ayloo chalifahtaynoo,” which is clearly plural. One hen is presumably for her, and so the other must be for her as yet unborn child. A question therefore arises: If Judaism denies original sin, then for what can the unborn fetus possibly need to atone?

Harold Greenberg
Rye, New York
The Term “Meritocracy” was coined by a British sociologist who was mocking the very idea of it. In 1958, Michael Young published a book called The Rise of the Meritocracy, in which he vented his spleen at the notion of a social system designed to reward those who were already successful by dint of their lucky genes. Caustic Young’s intent may have been, but the word “meritocracy” was soon welcomed in the United States as a new name for an older idea: Thomas Jefferson’s vision of a nation whose citizens had formed a “natural aristocracy of talent and virtue” as opposed to the limited opportunities afforded those who lived among the hereditary aristocracies of Europe.

This understanding of the American Dream gave rise to the up-by-the-bootstraps heroes of Horatio Alger’s fiction in the 19th century and the vast motivational and entrepreneurial literature of the 20th, among other iterations.

Will it survive the 21st?

In the immediate aftermath of Operation Varsity Blues, the FBI sting operation that led to the arrest of 50 people for bribery and fraud for their efforts to get children into schools such as Georgetown University, the University of Southern California, and Yale University when they otherwise would not have been admitted, the verdict seemed clear: The college admissions game was rigged, and meritocracy is a myth.

The details revealed by the scandal did little to bolster any lingering faith in meritocratic ideals. Obsessive “snowplow” parents photoshopped their kids’ heads onto images of water-polo players and pole-vaulters to fake the athletic prowess their offspring lacked. Wealthy people spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on a fake charity that used the money to hire corrupt test-takers to boost kids’ SAT scores. The scheme’s mastermind, Rick Singer, confidently told parents that for the right price, he could funnel them through a “side door” into competitive colleges—and he made good on his promises with the help of corrupt athletic coaches on several campuses.

Moderate-turned-radical labor historian Robert Reich may have sought to pin the scandal on every leftist’s favorite target by arguing that “in the age of Trump, it seems, everything is for sale,” but the corruption transcended partisan categories. Some of the parents arrested were outspoken liberals, including Desperate Housewives actress Felicity Huffman. One of the men indicted, a private-equity-fund manager, was an advocate of ethical investing. No doubt some were also registered Republicans.

In a rare moment of ideological agreement in our polarized age, denunciations of meritocracy poured forth from both left and right. The American Conservative declared that “the myth of meritocracy may be our most pervasive and destructive belief,” while in the Guardian, socialist Nathan Robinson was blunter: “It’s simple,” he wrote, “wealth always confers greater capacity to give your children the edge over other people’s children.”

Critics such as these view meritocracy as an illegitimate process that justifies and perpetuates what they believe to be deep social inequalities and unfairness; some find even belief in the idea of meritocracy harmful. Clifton Mark, who writes about psychology, argued in Aeon that “a growing body of research in psychology and neuroscience suggests that believing in meritocracy makes people more selfish, less self-critical, and even more prone to acting in discriminatory ways. Meritocracy is not only wrong; it’s bad.”

Is it? And if it is, then why are we not more eager

Christine Rosen is senior writer at Commentary.
to eliminate it? Maybe we will become so in the wake of this scandal, but the scandal itself reveals just how valuable and scarce the rewards of the meritocracy appear even to those who have already scaled it.

Like democracy, meritocracy has always been a confounding ideal because it is one that must be put into practice in the real world by flawed human beings. It’s an is (because we claim to live in a meritocracy) and an ought (because we want our system to reward hard work and talent) at the same time. It is something to which we aspire and something we want to describe the workings of our country at its best. And because we are fallen creatures, achieving both the is and the ought at the same time will always be corrupted by human efforts to gain advantage.

The majority of Americans still believe that talent and effort are, and should be, rewarded with success. A 2016 report on economic mobility by the Brookings Institution found that 69 percent of Americans believe that in our country, “people get rewarded for intelligence and skill,” while only 19 percent believe that “coming from a wealthy family is ‘essential’ or ‘very important’ to getting ahead.” If meritocracy is so bad, why do we still think it’s so good?

Critics of meritocracy are correct in pointing out that the current process of distributing meritocracy’s benefits in college admissions is severely compromised. Consider the many exceptions that aren’t illegal “side doors” that nevertheless give special consideration to applicants regardless of their merit: the children of alumni (legacy students), athletes, affirmative-action applicants, and the children of wealthy parents who pledge donations to the institutions where their children are applying, to name just a few.

Consider the many exceptions that aren’t illegal ‘side doors’ that nevertheless give special consideration to applicants regardless of their merit: the children of alumni (legacy students), athletes, affirmative-action applicants, and the children of wealthy parents who pledge donations to the institutions where their children are applying, to name just a few.

Her solution at least retains some ideal of merit, but it introduces a new “side door”: a process even more amenable to manipulation than the current system by substituting vague sentiments for imperfect but nevertheless measurable things such as standardized test scores. Who decides what the “good of society” is, and how do they use that as a standard for selecting which 17- and 18-year-olds are likely to achieve it?

Similarly, socialists like Robinson who reject the very idea of meritocracy because, they argue, meritocracy is merely a lie the wealthy tell themselves to justify their privilege, have a misguided understanding of the zeitgeist. “The main function of the concept is to assure elites that they deserve their position in life,” he writes. “It eases the ‘anxiety of affluence,’ that nagging feeling that they might be the beneficiaries of...
the arbitrary ‘birth lottery’ rather than the products of their own individual ingenuity and hard work.”

But that’s not quite right. Indicted mom and Full House actress Lori Loughlin and her ilk clearly have anxiety, but it isn’t about their affluence, which they are happy to flaunt and spend; they are anxious lest their children fail to achieve the kind of respectable social status they believe a college degree would give them.

And yet, despite that anxiety, Loughlin ended up raising a daughter, Olivia Jade, who preferred to be an Instagram influencer who made makeup tutorials and did not seek to be a USC student climbing the ladder of the meritocracy. As we know from her videos, she grudgingly agreed to attend college so she could have the growth experience of attending sorority parties and tailgates. Olivia spent the first week of her ill-gotten college experience live-streaming her vacation in Fiji, and who can blame her? She doesn’t want to run the world; she wants to be a social-media star with her own makeup line at Sephora—and in true meritocratic fashion, she had achieved her aim at a startlingly young age, even without having set foot on a college campus.

However vapid Olivia Jade’s Instagram performances are, you can’t fault her entrepreneurial instincts. We live in a world that made Kylie Jenner a billionaire by the age of 21. People go to college marketing classes and attend two years of business school to figure out how to do what Olivia Jade had mastered without any of that before her 18th birthday.

Our culture might demand Stakhanovite work habits from the children of the elite who want to mimic their parents’ success by getting into Harvard; but it also makes popular heroes of (and lots of money for) YouTubers, reality-television stars, and the Insta-famous. What’s interesting is that Lori Loughlin did not respect her daughter’s undeniable entrepreneurial achievement because it did not fit in with the meritocratic ideal—an ideal Loughlin herself bypassed as a teenager when the success of her own modeling and acting career led her to forswear college altogether.

If you embrace the cynicism of those who argue that we should just admit that the whole system is rigged and start over, then you must still devise an alternative, one that recognizes the practical and cultural challenges of sorting and ranking our fellow citizens. How do we determine eligibility for college admission? Should social-justice concerns or economic hardship replace merit as an ideal? How, in this new and improved system, do we apportion praise for individual successes or assign blame for failures? It’s not an easy needle to thread. Recall that the same president (Barack Obama) whose educational program was called “Race to the Top” also told the people who had made it there as business owners, “You didn’t build that.”

If we abandon the ideal of meritocracy, what’s left are well-intentioned but mushy theories like Guinier’s, or top-down sorting by whatever self-appointed mandarin class has the most political power. The latter is the preferred solution of the progressive and socialist left. Complaining recently about the media’s tendency to label candidates like Democratic presidential aspirant Pete Buttigieg “smart,” Liza Featherstone of the socialist magazine Jacobin argued, “This notion of ‘smart’ allows elites to recast inequality as meritocracy. In this narrative, you’re rich because you did well in high school and went to Princeton, not because capitalism has taken something from someone else and given it to you.” She called for an end to “fetishizing” such “conventional manifestations” of merit as it “undermines the genuinely emancipatory politics of collective action.” Other American socialists agree. “If we wanted anything resembling a ‘meritocracy,’” Nathan Robinson writes, “we would probably have to start by instituting full egalitarian communism.”

As Tocqueville observed, “among democratic nations, new families are constantly springing up, others are constantly falling away, and all that remain change their condition.” It’s a flawed and messy process, which is why the deserving don’t always receive their fair reward and the undeserving sometimes rise. Meritocracy is corruptible and sometimes counterproductive. It might even be, as Clifton Mark argues, “the most self-congratulatory of distribution principles.” But like democracy, which has also been accused of all these things, it’s still better than the alternatives.

---

However vapid Olivia Jade’s Instagram performances are, you can’t fault her entrepreneurial instincts. We live in a world that made Kylie Jenner a billionaire by the age of 21. People go to college marketing classes and attend two years of business school to figure out how to do what Olivia Jade had mastered without any of that before her 18th birthday.
Let’s Praise Ourselves for the Worst Reporting of the Decade!

MATTHEW CONTINETTI

IT’S AN EPIC SAGA, Trump and Russia. The tale predated his election, marred his presidential transition, dogged his first months in office, and obsessed the media from May 17, 2017—when Robert Mueller was appointed special counsel to investigate potential collusion between the Trump campaign and Russian government—to March 22, 2019. That was the day Attorney General William Barr notified Congress that Mueller had filed his report and closed the investigation. And the air started whooshing out of the media’s giant Vladimir Putin–shaped balloon.

“The Special Counsel’s investigation,” Barr wrote, “did not find that the Trump campaign or anyone associated with it conspired or coordinated with Russia in its efforts to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election.” Mueller’s team appears to have been divided over whether a president can obstruct justice by exercising his official duties, and so punted on this important question to Barr, whose word is final. As far as Robert Mueller is concerned, Donald Trump is clear.

There are no final endings in Washington, of course, no definitive settlements to public controversies, ultimate resolutions to scandal, or authoritative judgments on public officials. It would have been foolish to believe that the official end of the Mueller investigation would conclude the myriad speculations into Trump’s relationship with Putin and satiate the appetites of cable anchors and Democratic congressmen for accusations of Trump malfeasance.

If this truly were the end of the Russia saga, half of CNN and MSNBC would have to be reprogrammed, and conservatives would have few excuses to talk about the Deep State. With the Democrats in control of the House of Representatives, the infrastructure is in place to keep the investigations and conspiracy theories going indefinitely. It’s not like coverage of the Russia probe ever relied overmuch on evidence anyway.

“It’s important to acknowledge the value of the serious journalism,” pleaded Margaret Sullivan in a recent Washington Post column, “because there’s a real risk that news organizations will take the edges off their coverage of this subject now.” You’ve got to be delusional to believe that the Post and the Times would ever dial back their reporting on President Trump, since it’s the best business decision they’ve made in decades. Also, isn’t coverage with “edges” supposed to cut against the subject of one’s reporting, not the reporter himself? I’m trying to think of articles and columns in elite media institutions that treated this story with the full degree of objectivity, empiricism, detachment, documentation, and dispassion the subject deserved.

It’s a strain.

Surely Sullivan can’t be holding up as “serious” the October 31, 2016, Slate article that asked, “Was a Trump Server Communicating With Russia?” The piece was a textbook example of the Russia recipe:

With this piece, Matthew Continetti takes up the Washington Commentary column and ends five years as Commentary’s Media Commentary columnist.
Take an intriguing but inconclusive detail, stir vigorously with assumptions of bad faith, add a dash of sources both named and anonymous, and knead the copy until the only possible conclusion the reader can draw is that Donald Trump is up to some very, very bad things with the authoritarian ruler in Moscow. Doesn’t matter if the worst implications of the story don’t pan out.

“With some regrettable and damning exceptions,” Sullivan wrote, “individual stories that seemingly went too far—reality-based news outlets have done quite well on this story.” One marvels at a sentence like this, dripping as it is with self-satisfaction and condescension while acknowledging and diminishing the significance of “individual stories” that “seemingly went too far” by being, you know...wrong.

When Brian Ross falsely reported in December 2017 that President Trump ordered Michael Flynn to contact Russia before Election Day, he was just pushing the envelope, doing his job. It was a job he lost after ABC News retracted the story. Or when, the same month, CNN said WikiLeaks had given Donald Trump Jr. a heads-up about the Democratic National Committee emails it obtained, and this news, too, was soon falsified—we can’t let that be the skunk at the garden party.

About that April 2018 McClatchy story headlined, “Sources: Mueller has evidence Cohen was in Prague in 2016, confirming part of dossier;” something no one else has been able to prove and that Michael Cohen, having turned state’s evidence, continues to deny: You can’t expect everyone to abide by the same standards as Margaret Sullivan’s friends, can you?

Same with the November 2018 ABC News story wondering, “There are dozens of sealed criminal indictments on the D.C. docket. Are they from Mueller?” That was just asking questions. Sure, the “sealed indictments” that a few cable anchors thought would be broken, in an act of almost biblical revelation, accompanied by white horses and earthquakes, the day Mueller filed his report—these turned out not to exist. But the piece was well sourced—it even had a quote from Barack Obama’s former Justice Department spokesman!

Or that time in December 2018 when the Guardian said Paul Manafort visited WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange at the Ecuadorian Embassy in London during the 2016 campaign—a story no other organization corroborated—that was just part of the “aggressive coverage of Trump” Sullivan says is so important. Or the January 2019 Buzzfeed story that claimed Robert Mueller had evidence Donald Trump asked Michael Cohen to lie to Congress about the (since abandonded) Trump Tower Moscow—a story so incendiary that the normally tightlipped Mueller actually denied it. Or the Vanity Fair stories detailing how, “according to three sources...Don Jr. has been telling friends he is worried about being indicted” by Mueller. All of this was performance, playacting, a way to embellish a few connections, a couple of intimations and confidences, into a privileged status of being “in the know,” when no one really knows anything.

How is journalism produced in our nation’s capital? Partial disclosure, innuendo, gossip, rumor, some enticing detail that somebody heard from someone else. The best reporters do not relent until these wisps of information are substantiated, pinned down, confirmed in ways that will withstand scrutiny, and thus become news. The best are few and far between. The Trump era has instead put a premium on sensation, immediacy, prurience, exclusivity, and sympathy with the #Resistance.

Two weeks after Barr summarized the Mueller report’s findings to Congress, both the New York Times and Washington Post published stories exemplifying the Russia recipe. “Some on Mueller’s Team Say Report Was More Damaging Than Barr Revealed,” read the headline of a New York Times piece. “Limited information Barr has shared about Russia investigation frustrated some on Mueller’s team,” was the headline for the same article in the Post.

Nowhere in either story was an actual member of Mueller’s team quoted directly. “We’re not getting this directly from people who worked for Robert Mueller,” NBC’s Ken Dilanian said on the April 4 Meet the Press Daily. “We’re getting this from people who spoke to those people.” Oh, so it must be reliable then.

Woudn’t it be unsurprising that “some on Mueller’s team” might disagree with Barr? He’s a Republican. By the end of the probe, the special counsel’s office included some 19 lawyers and twice as many FBI agents. Most of the lawyers working for Mueller were registered Democrats, not one was a registered Republican, many had donated to Democratic campaigns, Mueller’s deputy Andrew Weissmann attended Hillary Clinton’s Election Night party in 2016 and sent a congratulatory email to former acting attorney general Sally Yates after she refused to implement the president’s travel ban in January 2017, and another wrote op-eds for Huffpost.

A game of telephone—that’s what Washington has been playing since we first learned of Donald Trump’s possible connections to Russia. The latest round has taken us from the Trump-Russia conspiracy to the Trump-Barr conspiracy. Is this progress? The saga continues. 

Let’s Praise Ourselves for the Worst Reporting of the Decade! : May 2019
ON FIRST AVENUE in New York City, across the street from the United Nations General Assembly, sits what is known as the Isaiah Wall. Inscribed on the structure, in large, ornate letters, are the words of the Hebrew prophet who gave the wall its name: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” These sentences conclude Isaiah’s prediction of the “end of days,” when all the nations of the world will recognize the God of Jacob and join Israel in serving Him in Jerusalem. The verse reflects one of the most sweeping, audacious, and universalistic beliefs in Judaism, and its presence on the Upper East Side, adorning the United Nations, cannot be seen as anything other than utterly inappropriate. For it is at the UN, more than at any other location on earth, where dictators are welcomed, tyrannical nations celebrated, and the peoples of the world gather to collectively deny the rights of the people of Israel and Israel’s historic connection to Jerusalem.

For those who recognize the incongruity of the verse’s location, the Isaiah Wall embodies an important reminder. While Judaism does indeed look forward to a time of universal peace, it also insists that this cannot come about without the defeat of evil. Jews have always looked forward to a time without war, but Jewish tradition also recognizes that at times we must give war a chance. Even as Isaiah looks forward to weaponry being rendered obsolete, the prophet Joel speaks of the exact opposite:

Proclaim ye this among the Gentiles; Prepare war, wake up the mighty men, let all the men of war draw near; let them come up: Beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears: let the weak say, I am strong.

Joel, as biblical scholars note, is deliberately reversing Isaiah’s words to stress that Isaiah’s vision is contingent upon his own; the wicked must be fought in order for war to cease.

This profound moral and political point lies at the heart of the structure of the Passover seder. One of the most renowned and venerable traditions of the evening, unmentioned in the Talmud but perpetuated for centuries, is the removal of a bit of wine from one’s goblet at the mention of each of the ten plagues, the divine wrath wreaked upon Egypt. Today, most Seder participants believe that this ritual illustrates that our
joy is diminished at the punishment of others. It is an explanation that is famous, ubiquitous, cited by Jews devout and secular alike.

And it is utterly unfounded in Jewish tradition.

In fact, the point meant to be made by the removal of wine is the exact opposite of what is assumed. One of the earliest documentations of this ritual is that of the 14th-century German rabbi Jacob Moelin, known as Maharil, in his collection of Jewish traditions. We remove the wine, he writes, in order to express our prayer that God “save us from all these and they should fall on our enemies.” The drops, in other words, express our desire that the visitation of the Lord’s wrath upon Egypt should happen to others, to every evil empire on earth. Though we definitely do not delight in the death of innocents who may also have suffered during the plagues, nevertheless the notion that God punishes nations as well as individuals is part of biblical theology, and a desire to see wicked nations punished is bound up in the belief in a just and providential God. “The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance,” the Psalms proclaim, and then the psalmist explains why: “So that a man shall say, Verily there is a reward for the righteous: verily he is a God that judgeth in the earth.”

As to the notion that the tradition reflects a diminishing of joy at this moment, the concept did not make its appearance in Jewish texts until half a millennium later. In an outstanding article in the journal Hakirah, Zvi Ron demonstrates that the earliest version of it was published in 19th-century Germany. It then made its way to the United States, where it “resonated with the sensibilities of English-speaking American Jews in particular, and was popularized through being presented as the only explanation for the custom in American Haggadot from the 1940s and on.” “This explanation,” Ron reflects, “came to be seen as more humane and understandable than the original explanation.”

The problem however, is that it is not more humane. We need reminders that only in the defeat of evil can innocents be saved; only when justice is done can swords finally be beaten into plowshares.

This is why the final eating of matzah at the Seder is followed by another plea for punishment: “Pour out thy wrath upon the heathen that have not known thee, and upon the kingdoms that have not called upon thy name.” This controversial sentence is also misunderstood, as it is elucidated by the verse that follows: “For they have devoured Jacob, and laid waste his dwelling place.” The reference is not to all nations, but to those who have sought to destroy the Jewish people; it, too, is a plea for the punishment of the wicked. Also missed is the significance of the paragraphs that immediately follow—psalms of praise that are largely not about Israel at all, but about a time when the “united nations” of humanity will join in praise of God. “Praise the Lord, all the nations, adore him, all the peoples,” we read in the Haggadah, followed by another stanza universalistic in nature: Nishmat kol chai tevarekh et shimikha, “the soul of every living being will bless Your Name.”

There are profoundly universalistic elements to the Haggadah. The first part of the Seder focuses on Israel and its enemies: ‘In every generation they rise up against us to destroy us, and God saves us from their hands.’ Yet the Seder is concluded by emphasizing our shared humanity, looking forward to a time when war will cease and the words incised on the Isaiah Wall will be fulfilled. The genius of Judaism lies in its balance of the particular and the universal; indeed, its extraordinary nature consists in its insistence that only through particularism can the universal be appreciated, and only through justice can peace be achieved.

In 1981, Menachem Begin’s government annexed the Golan Heights, and the United Nations General Assembly responded with a sweeping condemnation of Israel. The Mayor of New York, Ed Koch, announced his intention to alter the Isaiah Wall, adding an inscription that would reflect the United Nations’ “hypocrisy, immorality, and cowardice.” Koch’s worthy goal was not achieved. Yet the unchanged, incongruous words on the wall at the UN remind us how much evil remains in the world, and why we must pray, and work, for its defeat. Only then will Isaiah’s vision of a world without weapons, and of nations united in service of God, be realized. May this eschatological event occur as soon as next year—in Jerusalem. 

Misunderstanding the Drops of Wine : May 2019
CULTURAL COMMENTARY

A COMpendium of things that interested us this month

The Taking of MH-370

THE STORY of Malaysian Airlines Flight 370 was a worldwide sensation, not least because the complete disappearance of the plane seemed to be a strange real-life mirror event to the proceedings on the hit television show Lost. That show proved a gigantic cheat because its central mysteries were never solved; the MH-370 story is similarly unresolved in a manner that almost never happens in the real world. A freelance journalist named Jeff Wise has spent much of the past five years obsessively studying it, and has published a Kindle book called The Taking of MH-370. It’s an astonishing performance. Wise goes through every piece of evidence, every report, every word and comes to the conclusion that investigators were deliberately and brilliantly misled by whoever took over the plane to look in the wrong place—and that the right place is Kazakhstan and an airstrip called Yubileyniy, which would mean the perpetrator could only be Vladimir Putin. Read this stunning piece of investigative journalism and see if he convinces you.

— John Podhoretz

Mothers: Stories

THE SHORT STORY has become the go-to form for far too many trendy sentiments—for example, the work of Kristen Roupenian of the infamous MeToo-moment New Yorker story “Cat Person,” whose debut collection offers shocking (and shockingly bad) stories about sex, necrophilia, and murder. Which is why Chris Power’s Mothers: Stories comes at just the right moment. Power has for years written a column for the Guardian about the short story, thoughtfully exploring the work of writers like Samuel Beckett, Silvina Ocampo, and John Updike, among others. Like a brilliant surgeon who has performed thousands of intricate procedures, Power’s technical prowess in crafting his own stories is remarkable, but never antiseptic. Loosely structured around the life of a woman named Eva, the 10 stories in Mothers span a wide geography, including Sweden, Greece, and Mexico, and Power’s quiet pacing allows details of setting and character to emerge seamlessly. The result is a beautiful book about the painful experience of being human—and the often thwarted desire to feel that one belongs. If timing is everything in short stories (and it is), you won’t find a better practitioner of it than Power. The best endorsement I can give is to say that reading Power inspired me to reread one of the masters of the form, Anton Chekhov. Doing so only reaffirmed the impression I had of Power as one of our best living short-story writers—and one whose work, like Chekhov’s, should endure.

— Christine Rosen

Maybe You Should See Someone

THERE HAVE been many good books about psychotherapy—more, perhaps, than there have been successful therapies. One of the best novels of the 1980s was Judith Rossner’s August, a portrait of a decade-long therapy between a brilliant teenage artist whose home life is a trainwreck and a talented shrink whose private life is a shambles. Now Lori Gottlieb has written a nonfiction version of August called Maybe You Should See Someone,
in which she tells both the story of therapies she has supervised and her own therapy, which followed a cataclysm in her private life. Gottlieb seems like an uncommonly sensible person, and she brings an uncommon sensibility to her efforts to help her patients—even as she shows exactly the same kind of resistance to truth and change in her own treatment. It's a wonderful book—if, perhaps, just a tad too pat in its final reassurances about the glories of a profession that has likely harmed as many people as it has helped.

— John Podhoretz

Highwaymen

NETFLIX’s original film *Highwaymen*, starring the somewhat unidimensional but compelling Kevin Costner and a delightful Woody Harrelson, is a slightly less dreamlike version of the first season of HBO’s *True Detective*. Set in 1934, the film follows two members of the disbanded extralegal hit squad informally called the Texas Rangers who have been pulled out of retirement to do what had previously eluded uniformed law-enforcement officers: end Bonnie and Clyde’s reign of terror by any means necessary. A colorful portrait of the often monochromatically depicted Depression-era South and Midwest, *Highwaymen* explores what might have been the last example of frontier justice in the United States. The movie’s depiction of an America spellbound by the exploits of Bonnie and Clyde suggests we are not much different eight decades on; after all, Michael Avenatti held much of America spellbound before his multiple criminal indictments, among them the allegation that he systematically defrauded a paraplegic man on disability insurance. We are just as susceptible to enchantment by the unscrupulous as long as they appear to be sticking it to the powerful.

— Noah Rothman

Kanopy

BEFORE the advent of the Internet and its user-targeting technologies, it was possible to stumble unexpectedly upon the interesting or beautiful. There are advantages, of course, to having content “pushed” at us by algorithmic design, but one of the things we’ve traded away in the process is the opportunity to get lost amid intriguing possibilities. Popular streaming movie services such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video are designed to anticipate your tastes and present an array of titles selected just for you. Convenient as this is, it can also feel stifling.

Kanopy, a streaming service offered free to most public-library-card holders in the United States, provides a different experience—one more akin to, well, wandering the aisles of a vast film library. Each month, users can choose up to 10 movies or television shows from thousands of available titles that lean toward the avant-garde, foreign, independent, and classic. To get a sense of how comprehensive this library is: You could use your 10 choices on nothing but the films of Buster Keaton or Peter Greenaway and still not exhaust the movies Kanopy has made available by either filmmaker. Or you can get lost in the omnibus of strange titles and choose from films that you never would have known.

The joy of Kanopy, then, is twofold. For cinephiles, it’s a massive trove of wondrous art. For the rest of us, it’s a reminder that getting lost (even while sitting on your couch) can be something of a human privilege. — Abe Greenwald
WASN’T SO LONG AGO that “epistemic closure” was supposedly the exclusive province of Republicans. For years, self-satisfied liberal analysts maintained that the Fox News Channel and talk radio had incepted a kind of mood disorder in the conservative body politic that refused all evidence or information challenging to its most deeply held beliefs. “Every intellectual movement needs to constantly question itself; otherwise it becomes stale,” wrote former-Republican-official-turned-GOP-critic Bruce Bartlett in a typical 2010 remark. “Conservatives have sort of reached a position of intellectual closure.”

Observers with no clear interest in the Republican Party’s well-being or the health of the conservative move-

Noah Rothman is the associate editor of Commentary and the author of Unjust: Social Justice and the Unmaking of America, out now from Regnery Gateway.
ment offered sorrowful aperçues about this disorder. In the wake of Mitt Romney’s 2012 loss, MSNBC host Rachel Maddow counseled conservatives and Republicans to “pop the factual bubble they have been so happy living inside if they do not want to get shellacked again.”

The Atlantic’s Marc Armbinder mourned as follows: “I want to find Republicans to take seriously, but it is hard.” That was not, he confessed, because the right’s more serious voices didn’t exist, but because “they are marginalized, even self-marginalizing.” The GOP, these ubiquitous liberal voices advised, would have to break its addiction to this self-reinforcing feedback loop if it was ever again going to be a nationally representative institution.

In 2019, the Democratic Party is giving signs of suffering from a form of epistemic closure of its own. After the 2010 midterm election brought Barack Obama’s aggressive legislative agenda to a halt, the party’s progressive wing has been in the political wilderness. The progressives spent most of the decade incubating a set of ambitious and far-reaching ideas—policies that never seem to have been examined along the way by a single sceptical eye. They have now emerged from their cocoon as the revivified Democratic Party has taken charge of the House of Representatives and readies itself for a 2020 challenge to Donald Trump. And the progressives who are besotted with them seem genuinely surprised that their policy preferences are being greeted with scepticism at best and astonishment at worst.

**FOR SOME DEMOCRATS, THE PROMISE OF ‘ECONOMIC SECURITY’ WOULD NOT BE SATISFIED BY THE PROMISE OF EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION. FOR THEM, ‘ECONOMIC SECURITY’ MEANS A GUARANTEED INCOME PROVIDED BY THE GOVERNMENT THAT WOULD, IN ONE GO, RAISE EVERY AMERICAN OVER THE ANNUAL POVERTY THRESHOLD.**

The emblematic policy is a smorgasbord of desiderata called the Green New Deal, only some of which is dedicated to environmental remediation. The Democratic Party’s climate catastrophists appear to have convinced themselves that the only surefire way to prevent running away climate change is the radical transformation of the economy. To call this 10-year plan ambitious is an understatement. The initial proposal for a Green New Deal congressional subcommittee called for the shuttering of all fossil-fuel-generating power plants, replacing the country’s energy grid, enhancing its water-related infrastructure, upgrading “every residential and industrial building” in the United States, scaling back America’s industrial agriculture sector to “local-scale,” eliminating all greenhouse-gas emissions produced by transportation, and exporting this technological and paradigmatic revolution around the world.

This was no rough draft. Within weeks, more than 60 House Democrats co-sponsored a legislative resolution backing these measures. Democratic 2020 hopefuls including Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, Kirsten Gillibrand, Cory Booker, Julian Castro, Pete Buttigieg, Tulsi Gabbard, and Amy Klobuchar have endorsed the Green New Deal, in whole or “in concept” as “aspirational.”

Given all this support, you might think that the kinks of this wild-eyed proposal were worked out long ago. You’d be wrong.

The Green New Deal’s chief proponent—Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez—promoted the plan in a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document published on her website. The FAQ explained that America would be reducing its fossil-fuel emissions to zero while eliminating nuclear-power generation, which would be beyond the capacity of existing technology to achieve in a 10-year time frame. The FAQ also said the Green New Deal would eventually retire the internal combustion engine. The document confessed that emissions from livestock and airplanes might not be eliminated entirely at the end of a decade, but we’d be well on our way. It would use “high-
speed rail at a scale where air travel stops becoming necessary,” an implausible notion considering that even California’s progressive Governor Gavin Newsom couldn’t make a bullet train linking the Bay Area and Silicon Valley work at a reasonable cost. Indeed, the FAQ was disdainful of the notion that cost should be part of the equation. “The question isn’t how will we pay for it,” the FAQ insisted, “but what will we do with our new shared prosperity?”

The FAQ was a disaster. It was mocked, dismissed, and eventually scrubbed from the Internet. The Federalist’s David Harsanyi called it a manual for how to “tear down modernity.” The FAQ was “a recipe for economic Armageddon,” wrote the Washington Examiner’s Tom Ragan. In what may be the sincerest admission that Ocasio-Cortez had done her party no favors, the New York Times’ headline read, “Ocasio-Cortez Team Flubs a Green New Deal Summary, and Republicans Pounce.” But rather than fall on their swords and acknowledge the crudity of their rollout of the policy, Ocasio-Cortez’s advisers tried to convince observers that their eyes had deceived them. Robert Hockett, a Cornell law professor and adviser to Ocasio-Cortez, told Fox News Channel’s Tucker Carlson that the FAQ was a “doctored document that someone else has been circulating.” Her chief of staff, Saikat Chakrabarti, later claimed it was only one of many “early drafts” that “got leaked” to the press.

Once it was exposed to the sunlight, the Green New Deal instantly began to wilt. What would it do to help the millions of people who would be displaced amid the abolition of any occupation that is made possible by the burning of fossil fuels? Well, it commits the government to “guaranteeing a job” to “all people of the United States.” Ocasio-Cortez’s boosters were especially humiliated by a phrase in the FAQ that promised occupations to those who are “unwilling to work,” but the unwilling are surely part of a category as broad as literally everyone in America. To be sure, a federal jobs guarantee has been the great hope of the progressive left for generations, but it’s tough to generate traction for that kind of plan while at the same time outlawing most of the productive economy.

A Brookings Institution analysis of some of the leading proposals for a federal jobs program found that there are about 50 million Americans who could take advantage of such a program—some who are currently unemployed, but many more who are employed full- or part-time making less than $15 per hour. Such a program would have positive effects. The number of underemployed workers would collapse, poverty rates would decline, and wages would rise as competition for low-skill occupations increased.

But what kinds of work would this program guarantee? Some proposals would expand the ranks of teachers, teachers’ assistants, office-support professionals, personal-care providers, construction and maintenance workers, and police and security officers. But that would be little consolation for those employed in the millions of occupations that would be phased out by the Green New Deal, many of which require professional expertise accumulated over the course of a lifetime and provide competition commensurate with those skillsets. A petroleum engineer would not be fulfilled by his new position as a public safety officer making minimum wage.

The most aggressive jobs programs would require $5 trillion over ten years, according to Brookings. But that wouldn’t cover the costs associated with providing displaced Americans job training, educational resources, and access to a college degree. That, too, is in the Green New Deal, but it’s not new. “Free” college has become a staple part of the progressive platform.

Making a four-year college degree a “debt-free” proposition has become a feature of the Democratic pitch to voters, and few have put as much meat on its bones as Senator Bernie Sanders. His plan would cost the federal treasury $470 billion over 10 years, but the financial strain is the least of his proposal’s objectionable effects. Ironically, “free college” would exacerbate the very inequality he and other progressives claim to oppose.

Prior to 1998, the United Kingdom experimented with taxpayer-funded university education, but the scheme became untenable when more and more people began to seek degrees as demand for skilled labor increased. The effect of “free college” was social stratification. Qualified students sought out schools with the most resources, while lower-tier colleges stagnated as their incentives to innovate dried up. These perverse incentives disappeared when the U.K. introduced market reforms into the higher-education system. And contrary to progressives’ expectations, enrollment continues to rise.

We can already see the pernicious effects of “free college” on social mobility in states that have tried to make college “debt-free.” State-level programs that cover the cost of college after students take advantage of federal aid divert resources to middle-class students and away from poorer degree-seekers. Two studies, one from the Institute of Higher Education Policy and another conducted by Ed Trust, found that state-level “free-college” programs without restrictions provided...
less benefit to lower-income students and undergradu-
ate students who are over 25 years old than to the 40
percent of undergraduate students older than 25 or
those who attend college outside the state where they
reside.

“These students still cannot afford college be-
cause they struggle with non-tuition costs, such as
books, housing, and transportation,” wrote Ed Trust
senior higher-education policy analyst Katie Berger.
This organization also found that the 200 “free col-
lege” programs in 41 states often limit eligibility based
on GPA, credit accumulation, and residency. This helps
manage costs but also has “a disproportionate impact
on the students least served by higher education and
fall[s] to address our nation’s college affordability
problem.”

What’s more, states and municipalities strugg-
ging to comply with a federal higher-education man-
date would face a widely expanded pool of applicants,
forcing them to enlarge their unwieldy armies of
non-faculty administrators. Between 1985 and 2005,
the cost of a four-year degree exploded. In that same
period, the number of faculty in higher education in-
creased by only 50 percent while administrators in-
creased by 85 percent and their staffs ballooned by a
staggering 240 percent. Those administrative profes-
sionals are not performing make-work jobs. They’re
navigating a complex labyrinth of federal regulations
and performing managerial oversight that full-time
faculty cannot. “Free college” would only exacerbate
the conditions that have led college costs to increase by
500 percent in roughly those same two decades, which
suggests that the estimated costs of Sanders’s proposal
are on the low end.

For some Democrats, the promise of “economic
security” would not be satisfied by the promise of em-
ployment and education. For them, “economic secu-
ity” means a guaranteed income provided by the gov-
ernment that would, in one go, raise every American
over the annual poverty threshold. While prominent
Democratic lawmakers, including Hillary Clinton and
Joe Biden, were sour on the idea only a few years ago,
the Green New Deal subcommittee proposal endorses
“basic income programs.” Goaded by tech-sector gi-
ants including Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, and
Richard Branson, the California Democratic Party has
now embraced the idea of a “universal basic income.”
Senators Kamala Harris and Cory Booker have also en-
dorsed the concept of a “UBI.”

Ray Dalio, manager of the hedge fund Bridgewa-
ter Associates, estimated that providing every Ameri-
can with $12,000 per year—the current poverty thresh-
old—would cost approximately $3.8 trillion every year.

That is approximately 21 percent of GDP and about 78
percent of all tax revenues. If a price tag amounting to
$38 trillion over 10 years doesn’t make you sweat, how
about the fact that this old idea has been an objective
failure everywhere it’s been tried?

Finland recently experimented with a program
that provided 2,000 unemployed people with a basic
income and no reporting requirements for two years.
While the recipients experienced more happiness and
less stress than the control group, the administrators
found to their distress that the program members were
not encouraged by their guaranteed income to go out
and find a job. They simply lived off the pilot program’s
per diem. What’s more, the Finnish government con-
cluded that the program, applied to all its 5.5 million
people, would require across-the-board income-tax
hikes of nearly 30 percent. The nation discontinued
the experiment. In July 2017, Ontario also experiment-
ed with a UBI and encountered many of the same prob-
lems as Finland.

This was all predictable, due to prior experience
with the idea in...the United States. The “negative in-
come tax,” as it was called, was essentially a minimum
income that phased out as earnings increased. In 1968,
the White House Office of Economic Opportunity se-
lected a series of communities in New Jersey to test the
NIT. The number of hours worked by the program's
beneficiaries declined, and those who lost a job while
on this form of assistance took longer to find new work
than did those without it.

What’s more, as the Stanford Research Institute
(SRI) found, the experiment did not increase nuclear
family cohesion, as theorists expected. Instead, it ex-
cacerbated the conditions that were leading families
to come apart. “The SRI researchers,” the study read,
“hypothesized that the availability of the income guar-
antee to some families reduced the pressure on the
breadwinner to remain with the family, while the ben-
efit-reduction rate also reduced the value to the family
of keeping a wage earner in the unit.”

It goes without saying that there can be no “eco-
nomic security” without the peace of mind provided
by health-care coverage. Perhaps that’s why health-
care mandates are also part of the Green New Deal,
which—let us recall—is supposedly about fighting
climate change. This is just one element of the Demo-
cratic Party’s embrace of ever more radical approaches
to health insurance. After the end of the Obama presi-
dency, the Obamacare plan was not only challenged
programmatically by the Republicans who success-
fully sought to remove its mandate, but philosophi-
cally by Democrats pushing for a single-payer system.
In 2017, one-third of the Democratic caucus in the

Democrats Go Wild : May 2019
Senate backed Bernie Sanders's Medicare-for-all single-payer plan, and it has only become more popular in the years since. Today, more than half of the Democratic Party's representatives in the House want to open Medicare up to all Americans. They regularly point to polling that suggests most voters are on their side. But that enthusiasm dissolves the minute Americans take a cursory glance under Medicare-for-all's hood.

Presidential candidate Kamala Harris's experience is illustrative. Shortly after launching her presidential bid, Harris sat down with CNN host Jake Tapper, who asked her about the provisions in the single-payer bill she co-sponsored that would all but do away with private insurance. "Let's eliminate all that," she said dismissively. "Let's move on."

The firestorm that followed these comments suggests that Harris hadn't thoroughly gamed this out. "It would take a mighty transition to move from where we are to that," said the number two Democrat in the Senate, Dick Durbin. Senator Tim Kaine added that he, too, would be uncomfortable forcing the 80 percent of Americans with employer-sponsored private insurance into a government program. "I'm not going to say you have to give it up," he said. "You can't just pull the rug out from underneath everybody's feet," Senator Gary Peters cautioned. Senator Chris Murphy advocated some form of health-care reform that would be "more politically palatable and ultimately more popular" than Harris's "statutory prohibition private plans." California Senator Dianne Feinstein said simply, "I'm not there yet."

What we learned from this is that most Americans might not have known that expanding Medicare to all Americans essentially nationalizes the health-insurance industry. Sanders's proposal makes employer-sponsored health insurance illegal and would likely crowd most other plans out of the marketplace by leaving them with an unsustainably small risk pool. That would force approximately 150 million Americans and their dependents into a government-sponsored insurance monopoly.

Every one of the 16 Senate Democrats who co-sponsored Sanders's single-payer bill knew this, but Harris's unwise acknowledgement prompted a Democratic stampede away from Medicare-for-all's central plank. Many Senate Democrats balked at the idea that you could simply legislate a $900-billion-per-year industry out of existence overnight. Fellow presidential candidate Cory Booker, who also co-sponsored Sanders's bill, went wobbly. "Even countries that have vast access to publicly offered health care still have private health care," he said when asked if he, too, wanted to eliminate private insurance. "So, no." With the pressure on, Harris relented. Her advisers confessed that the senator was suddenly amenable to health-care reform plans short of single-payer.

Once again, this progressive idea that gained such purchase among Democrats blew up on the tarmac the first time it met an even mildly skeptical audience. And the nationalization of the health-insurance industry was only the most obvious of Sanders-style single-payer's drawbacks. Two independent analyses of his plan pegged its costs at around $32 trillion over 10 years. Those costs would presumably be offset by a series of assumptions, among them the accrued savings from lower prescription costs and a reduced administrative burden on hospitals. But most of the savings comes from the assumption that doctors and hospitals would make do with a radical reduction in payments—up to of 40 percent less than what they get from private insurers—without negatively affecting the quality or availability of care.
ENVIRONMENTAL and economic policy aren’t the only public affairs in which the Democratic Party has allowed their youngish left flank to lead them into uncharted territory. The party is also staking out new ground when it comes to law enforcement.

Amid congressional negotiations aimed at avoiding another government shutdown, Democrats came up with a new demand: They wanted to decrease the number of beds in Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention centers. Democrats proposed and Republicans eventually agreed to a 17 percent reduction in the carrying capacity of ICE facilities, ostensibly with the goal of forcing the Trump administration to prioritize the arrest and deportation of violent illegal aliens. But the artificial cap on immigration officials’ ability to detain and remove any illegal immigrant from the country—not just at the border—marked a dramatic departure for Democrats.

It was only a decade ago that Democrats as prominent as now–Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer made a conspicuous point of using the phrase “illegal immigrants,” an expression that has fallen out of favor on the left, to communicate their commitment to enforcing immigration law. Democrats at the time often voted in favor of provisions that strengthened border security. Today, not only do Democrats oppose Trump’s border wall, they’re talking themselves out of support for any physical partitions along the border with Mexico. “I’d take the wall down,” said former Texas Congressman and potential 2020 presidential aspirant Beto O’Rourke when asked if he would order the removal of existing border barriers. Senator Gillibrand seemed to agree. “I could support it,” she said, presuming that tearing down the partitions that currently separate the United States and Mexico made sense. Of course, it most certainly does not.

When on rare occasion these Democratic utopians deign to consider how the country will pay for their multitrillion-dollar schemes, the stop-gap measures they support are laughable. Representative Ocasio-Cortez suggested higher marginal “tax rates as high as 60 or 70 percent” on your “10 millionth dollar.” But only about 16,000 Americans showed that much taxable income in 2016, the last year in which relevant government data are available. Her tax hike would raise only about $720 billion over a decade, a little more than what the United States spends on discretionary non-defense items in a single year.

Anyone who took a passing glance at Ocasio-Cortez’s proposal knew that Democrats would soon be looking for a bigger pool of Americans to squeeze. That’s why Senator Elizabeth Warren proposed a “wealth tax.” As with so many progressive proposals, the value of this plan rests entirely on the notion that this idea is common to Europe, so why shouldn’t it be adopted here? But this, too, doesn’t get the job done. Two University of California, Berkeley, economists estimated that Warren’s plan for a 2 percent tax on the assets of households worth over $50 million and a 3 percent tax on those worth over $1 billion would raise about $2.7 trillion over a decade. That would just about match what America shells out for its entitlement programs in one year. Or, it would, if Warren’s proposal was consistent with the Constitution, which it almost certainly is not.

The 16th Amendment, which gave birth to the federal income tax, permits the government to “levy tax on incomes,” not to expropriate private property when the government wants it. The courts have upheld this amendment’s original parameters by finding that inheritance taxes are constitutional only if they target
the transfer of wealth, not the wealth itself. Moreover, Warren proposes a 40 percent one-time “exit tax” on Americans who try to evade her tax by renouncing their citizenship. This over-broad and discriminatory provision infringes on basic rights. Even if it didn’t, it’s probably unenforceable.

If progressives are looking for a bigger pool of money to tax, they can find it most readily through economic growth. More jobs mean more people paying income and payroll taxes, to say nothing of consumption taxes they pay when they patronize local businesses, which use that revenue in turn to hire more people, and so on. But for some on the left, this reliable cycle of growth isn’t just confusing, it’s unwelcome. Take, for example, the campaign waged by New York’s progressives against Amazon’s plan to provide New York City with 25,000 new jobs, each averaging an annual salary of $150,000.

The centerpiece of their grievance—one that eventually led Amazon to conclude that investing in New York City simply wasn’t worth the aggravation—was $2.8 billion in tax incentives available not just to Amazon but any company that qualified. These activists insisted that this money would be better spent at home on much-needed infrastructure projects. “If we were willing to give away $3 billion for this deal, we could invest those $3 billion in our district ourselves if we wanted to,” a triumphant Ocasio-Cortez insisted. This exposes a fundamental misconception about what tax abatements are. That money can’t be invested in other programs because it hasn’t been earned yet. Earnings have not yet been generated from which the money would come. And now they never will. Only if one sees all income and revenue as public property to be doled out as a product of governmental beneficence could one adopt such a deluded view of tax incentives.

These progressives do not advocate a flatter and fairer tax code. They don’t resent tax incentives per se. They only resent this one firm, in part because it is so successful. Ocasio-Cortez was celebrating the preservation of the status quo at the expense of economic development and individual prosperity. This is what it means today to be a “progressive.”

The policies Democrats warmed to in their wilderness years are unlikely to be realized if one of them wins the White House in 2020, but that is cold comfort. An influential mass of Democratic voters support these radical ideas, and the party’s presidential candidates are campaigning on them. Democrats may be convincing themselves that the popularity of some of these proposals in polls insulates them from criticism, but that popularity has already proven illusory. If even gentlest incredulity can bring the whole progressive edifice crashing down, Democrats may want to consider going back to the drawing board while they still can.➤
IT’S HARD TO SAY EXACTLY when it started, but our politics has become exceedingly neurotic. The idea of neurosis predates its most famous clinical expositor, Sigmund Freud, and the term’s definition has shifted with changes in Western culture in the 125 years since Freud’s work on neurosis began. It has gone from describing a disease of the nervous system to its present meaning—a kind of charming and nerdy comic pessimism. To say our politics is neurotic is not to draw directly from either of those senses of the word. It is to say, rather, that we spend much of our shared cultural and political life in a state of collective panic over problems that are relatively small or don’t in fact exist. And in focusing on these distortions, we lose sight of the genuine political challenges that need addressing.

Just as the individual neurotic may suffer from an invented personal malady or take a minor problem and turn it into an all-consuming crisis, our increasingly neurotic citizenry has become adept both at summoning false emergencies from the ether—as with hate-crime hysteria on the left—and elevating moderate challenges into existential ones—as with illegal-immigration fever on the right.

As those two examples demonstrate, our national neurosis is bipartisan. Neither side wants to hear it, but Americans on both the left and right are inclined to bouts of unwarranted catastrophizing about this or that political issue. While liberals and conservatives don’t frequently focus on the same non-crisis, their mirror-image neurosis is one of the few things they have in common. And there are some issues—free trade, for example—about which both sides harbor unwarranted fears (or, if we stay with psychology, phobias). No prominent political camp, then, is working to redirect public attention toward more realistic concerns.

To make matters worse, the American media have taken to amplifying or even generating neurotic distress for fun and profit. In particular, major newspapers and television networks have become a clear-

---

Abe Greenwald is senior editor of Commentary.
ing house and legitimizing institution for the unfounded anxieties of the American left. As a result, those anxieties have come to dominate our shared existence as citizens, infusing the public square with fantastic speculation, conspiracy theory, and deep panic. Think of when the New Yorker ran with uncorroborated stories about drug-fueled rape parties involving a Supreme Court nominee. Or, on a larger scale, consider what we witnessed during the two years of so-called Russiagate: a daily, round-the-clock collective media effort to promote the idea that the president of the United States was somehow brought into office through a covert and illegal alliance with Russian president, Vladimir Putin—despite any substantive evidence of such a pact. Indeed, the baseless notion that the 2016 election was fixed in the first place took off in the press at light speed the moment Trump was elected. Around these stories and others there formed a kind of mass delusion, a widespread acceptance of fairly obvious falsehoods.

There are other ways of thinking about this strange state of affairs, but they don’t fit as neatly as the diagnosis of political neurosis. For example, there’s the idea that the United States is more divided than it’s ever been. The biggest problem with that theory is that it’s not true. Doubtless, we are very divided at the moment, but not more so than ever before. There were deadly battles between political opponents during the years of the country’s Founding and, of course, there was the Civil War. But even in the modern age, the country has been more divided. During the late 1960s and early ’70s, tensions surrounding the civil-rights movement, the Vietnam War, and radical leftism spilled into the streets in the form of violent clashes and murderous domestic terrorism. It’s worth noting that, despite these eruptions, the political crises that were tearing the country apart—institutionalized prejudice and an ongoing war—were real.

Here is the verboten truth: We live in an age of unprecedented blessing. And perhaps that’s why it’s also an age of political neurosis. Humans are social and political creatures by nature and must engage one another to solve problems—whether or not those problems exist. Could it be that with fewer large-scale policy crises than we’ve ever had, we find ourselves exaggerating or inventing them? The evidence is compelling.

A GLIMPSE OF THE past few decades of American history reveals an astounding record of progress. And yet, for each genuine accomplishment, a fake crisis has popped up to take the place of the one that’s been resolved:

FREE TRADE. Decades of the increased free flow of goods and services among nations have lifted the global poor out of unspeakable misery and contributed to significant gains in quality of life for all Americans. And yet, free trade is now viewed by some on the American left as evil colonialism abroad and, by a large contingent on the right, as the ruination of America’s working class.

As a candidate for president in 2016, Hillary Clinton demonstrated her skills as a political weathervane in coming out against the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement (which she had earlier supported). And Donald Trump has made cracking down on free trade, at least rhetorically, a signature feature of his presidency. As things now stand, polls show that the American right (once the home of free trade’s staunchest defenders) is now more anti-trade than the left.

These attitudes are at odds with reality. Between 1990 and 2010 alone, access to affordable goods
and services provided by free trade lifted almost a billion people out of poverty around the world. And according to Homi Kharas and Kristofer Hamel of the Brookings Institution, as of September 2018, “just over 50 percent of the world’s population, or some 3.8 billion people, live in households with enough discretionary expenditure to be considered ‘middle class’ or ‘rich.’” Put another way: “For the first time since agriculture-based civilization began 10,000 years ago, the majority of humankind is no longer poor or vulnerable to falling into poverty.”

Despite widespread belief to the contrary, Americans have not been deprived of the gains. The domestic benefits are numerous. The absence of harsh tariffs on imported goods has allowed poorer Americans to purchase these goods for lower prices. Without tariffs on imported resources, American industries that consume those resources have been able to keep their costs low, allowing for growth and high employment. And while it’s true that free trade can cost jobs in inefficient industries, it also frees up resources for growth in new industries. Finally, if free trade were at the heart of an American employment crisis, how is it that, since Trump’s election, America’s trade deficit has hit an all-time high (contrary to his stance) while unemployment has steadily decreased?

The benefits accrued by free trade are a direct result of U.S.-led multilateral trade agreements that have been forged over decades. But talk of these benefits has been supplanted by complaints about exaggerated or imagined problems.

**CAPITALISM.** Along with free trade, American capitalism has helped raise the standard of living for all U.S. citizens. And yet, the American left is neurotically fixated on the idea that capitalism is evil and that its wealthiest practitioners must pay. This has become a rallying cry for Democratic socialists such as Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who celebrated Amazon’s pulling out of plans to locate its second headquarters in Queens, where it would have provided 25,000 jobs. According to Ocasio-Cortez, this showed that “everyday Americans still have the power to organize and fight for their communities and they can have more say in this country than the richest man in the world.” (Locals, not incidentally, were overwhelmingly in favor of Amazon’s coming to town.) Bernie Sanders, another Democratic Socialist, said during one CNN interview, “If your question is, am I going to demand that the wealthy and large corporations start paying their fair share of taxes, damn right I will.”

These popular Democrats and others have brought liberals around to an anti-capitalist stance more generally. Last August, a poll by Gallup found that only 47 percent of Democrats and Democrat-leaning independents had a positive view of capitalism, while 58 percent had a positive view of socialism.

Far from being a problem, the success of capitalism is another of our blessings. Free markets have fueled innovation and led to widespread prosperity, which has in turn improved the lives of countless citizens. According to the U.S. census, today’s average “poor” American lives in an air-conditioned home with multiple color TVs (with cable), a VCR, and a DVD player. That home is likely to be several hundred square feet larger than those of Europe’s lowest-income bracket. And the typical poor American probably has a car. According to a 2015 study in *Obesity Research and Clinical Practices*, the American poor are far from facing starvation. “Places with higher concentrations of low-income, minority populations had increased rates of obesity,” the study concludes. The point isn’t that obesity is good. It’s that access to affordable food isn’t an issue among America’s lowest earners.

Has capitalism led to greater inequality? Probably. But if it has simultaneously enabled the poorest
among us to live more safely and comfortably than they could under any other economic system, then on balance, it’s a blessing.

WAR AND PEACE. Since the end of World War II, the human race has seen the most peaceful stretch of time in recorded history. This is a direct result of the United States having become the most powerful country on the planet and using its power and diplomacy to maintain a relatively cooperative world order. And yet, politicians and intellectuals routinely lament the United States’ ongoing penchant for “endless wars,” speaking as if America’s apparently unquenchable thirst for blood is unsettling an otherwise peaceful world.

This is one of those neurotic crises fueled by Americans on both the left and right. For dissenters on the left, our recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (which have thankfully produced far fewer American deaths than many shorter wars did) are racist, imperialist bloodbaths. On the right, they’re seen as the opposite: quixotic efforts by hopeless do-gooders who are wasting American blood and treasure on enemies. On both sides, however, these wars are emblematic of a larger American addiction to battle—an addiction that must be beaten.

Obama, of course, spoke about our supposedly never-ending wars every chance he got. “As you are well aware, I do not support the idea of endless war,” he said, in one characteristic speech about the country’s ongoing military obligations. “I have repeatedly argued against marching into open-ended military conflicts that do not secure our core security interests.” Current Democratic presidential candidates Bernie Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and others make similar comments today. And President Donald Trump receives hearty applause from Republican crowds whenever he boasts that he, too, will “stop the endless wars.”

In a concession to reality, Trump has backed off his plan to wind down the war in Afghanistan. Perhaps someone convinced him that maintaining troops in a low-casualty fight against al-Qaeda’s closest sponsors is not exactly the ill-considered folly of a bloodthirsty republic.

PREJUDICE. Bigotry is a human problem and it hasn’t disappeared. But the progress that’s been made in combating bigotry in the modern United States has been remarkable. And yet, at our high point of inclusivity, the left has launched a campaign against prejudice that’s wholly disconnected from the state of things.

It was just over 50 years ago that Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and it’s not quite 50 years since the Civil Rights Act of 1968. The shame of those landmark laws coming so late in our young country’s history should not be forgotten. At the same time, the fact that these laws passed only half a century ago makes what has happened since all the more remarkable.

In the course of that time, increases in high-school and college graduation among black Americans has consistently far outpaced growth in graduation among white Americans. In terms of income, an aggregate gap persists between African Americans and white Americans, but a regional breakdown reveals that much of this gap has to do with geography. And, according to data published in a 2016 Pew study, in cities such as Atlanta, Washington, Austin, Denver, Nashville, Houston, and Dallas, the rates of African-American income growth are outpacing overall growth.

It’s often noted, as it should be, that in 2008, the United States elected its first black president. But it’s less seldom understood how much progress has been made by black Americans in other positions of political leadership. A recent Pew study notes: “In 1965, there were no blacks in the U.S. Senate, nor were there any black governors. And only six members of the House of Representatives were black. As of 2019, there is greater representation in some areas—52 House members are black, putting the share of black House members (12 percent) on par with the share of blacks in the U.S. population overall for the first time in history.” The study mentions that there has been little change in the number of black governors and senators, but also notes that the number of “blacks serving in a presidential Cabinet was at or above parity with the population during the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations.”

If you listened only to liberal politicians and pundits, you might never know about such progress. On the academic left, reparations for the descendants of American slaves is almost unanimously endorsed. And this year, Democratic candidates such as Julian Castro and Beto O’Rourke have expressed their openness to the idea. Setting aside any debate about the merits of such a plan, what’s telling is that such a dramatic notion is being weighed at the very high point of black progress. That’s what makes it, for our purposes, neurotic.

At the same time, there’s been an ongoing rash of fake hate crimes staged against blacks and other minorities. And all of this comes amid the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter movement, whose main contention—that police kill unarmed black Americans at alarming rates—is at odds with data on the subject. A 2016 study at Harvard, for example, found that police are slightly more likely to shoot unarmed whites than unarmed blacks.
Gay Americans have also seen astounding gains in recent years—namely, the Supreme Court’s legalizing same-sex marriage in all 50 states in 2015. Yet the LGBTQ activist community has—seemingly in response—become more insistent than it ever was. The question is, what’s the remaining crisis? It’s hard to say. Trans activism is ubiquitous, but so, too, is the celebration of the American trans community. Redoubled activism in the very face of social acceptance and elevation is, politically speaking, neurotic.

**IMMIGRATION.** Illegal immigration is a problem for the United States. But in recent years, it’s become a much smaller problem. Yet Republicans, rallied by Donald Trump’s pledge to build a wall at the southern border, have become far more hawkish on illegal immigration precisely at the point that some key indicators show significant improvement. The timing fits the pattern of political neurosis.

For one thing, according to Pew Research, the number of illegal immigrants in the United States has hit its lowest point in more than a decade. This was already the case in 2016, when Trump made illegal immigration the focal point of his presidential campaign. There are still millions of undocumented immigrants in the United States. And again, to be clear, illegal immigration remains a challenge that must be dealt with seriously. But the timing of the perceived crisis is not serious. More to the point, it’s inverted.

There are more figures still that make this case: In 2017, the number of arrests at the U.S.-Mexico border fell to 310,000. It hasn’t been that low since 1971. And according to data from the U.S. Customs and Border Protection, apprehensions at the border in 2017 dropped by 75 percent since 2000. Not only has overall illegal immigration fallen significantly in total number, but the number of undocumented immigrants from Mexico, Trump’s chief target, has fallen steadily since 2007.

Trump’s tough stance has prompted dead-end fights with Congress and various legal and political challenges. And it has made for endless political theater, highlighting the bad faith and histrionics of leaders across the political spectrum. But while this played out, a genuine acute crisis was developing. As of this writing, there are perhaps as many as 100,000 migrants from Honduras, Guatemala, and elsewhere at the border, and the U.S. does not have sufficient personnel or policies in place to deal with them. This is what happens when policy is made to address a false problem: Attention and resources are misallocated, and policymakers are caught flat-footed.

The U.S. HAS, for the time being, addressed the essential political problems that face any country. Americans are fed, mostly employed, and relatively safe. But that’s not to say that there are no real challenges to conquer. As the example of immigration hysteria makes clear, while the left and right go to war over neurotic concerns, America’s real political problems are left to fester.

In particular, the country’s greatest challenge is being scrupulously ignored. This is the looming debt crisis. Urgent as this issue is, it’s also drab. And because of its drabness, it doesn’t animate Americans the way our neurotic crises do. The Congressional Budget Office predicts that, by 2028, our national debt will be nearly 100 percent of our GDP, and that’s probably too optimistic; debt could exceed GDP much sooner. But whatever the future consequences, for now, it’s just a boring statement about something that hasn’t caused anyone pain.

There are other legitimate concerns, such as climate change and access to affordable health care. But on both of these issues, whatever truth there was to the case for action has long since been replaced by neurotic politics of the highest order. Doomsday scenarios and weaponized anecdotes have supplanted thoughtful analysis.

There is, finally, a very real crisis in our country, and it has little to do with politics. It’s a crisis of the soul or spirit. It manifests, for example, in the fact that American life expectancy has just declined two years in a row, something that’s not happened since World War II. The crisis is seen in a national suicide rate that’s risen almost 30 percent since the end of the 20th century. It’s seen in a recent survey of hospitals that found that the number of children between 5 and 17 being admitted for self-harm and attempted suicide has doubled between 2008 and 2015. The crisis is clear in our opioid epidemic. And it’s evident in polls that show prayer and belief in God is at an all-time low in the United States.

One cannot but wonder: Perhaps Americans’ unwillingness to recognize and be thankful for our country’s vast achievements is also part of this crisis. If so, the array of false catastrophes with which we find ourselves consumed is hiding a much deeper problem—one that no policy can address.
ARE DEMOCRATS going crazy? Consider the data points. Since the party’s triumphant showing in the midterm elections of 2018, leading figures have, to a greater or lesser degree, embraced: an end to fossil-fuel use in 10 years; a Medicare-for-all health-care system; infanticide; and reparations for the descendants of American slaves. These ideas are so extreme it is impossible to believe that the party that wishes to take control of the White House wants to go anywhere near them. And yet like a moth to a flame, the heat and the light tempt them. Tempt them so much. Is self-destructive behavior crazy? We all indulge in it at some time or other in our lives. So it might be on the normal side of crazy. But it’s not not crazy.

Should a party be prudent and cautious as it prepares itself for a long hard slog, or should it let out a rebel yell and just charge unceasingly at the enemy? There’s no right answer. Prudence and caution are always sensible in the long term, but politics is about emotion—and they are emotion-killers. If what you want is to make sure people invest with you emotionally, you need to engage with them directly. That has obvious risks, but potent rewards if the engagement takes. The rebel-yell charge only works if it terrifies your opponents. The Democratic rebel yell doesn’t seem to be worrying Donald Trump. Quite the opposite.

The problem with America in 2019 is that we are so used to having our emotions played with, every hour of every day, by outrage machines on the one hand and cute Internet cats on the other that, like drug addicts, we need ever more potent doses just to get our pulses racing at all. So the political-involvement machine has to be cranked up to 11.

Therefore, in 2019, it’s not enough to be for Obamacare, even at a time when Republicans don’t know what to say about health care; to really get the juices flowing, you need to propose a $32 trillion plan

John Podhoretz is the editor of Commentary.
that will terrifying everyone in the country who is fine with their own health-care plan (which, according to polls, is about 66 percent). It’s not enough to support abortion rights; you are obliged to defend the procedure whereby a viable baby is murdered if a mother says so, perhaps even entirely outside the womb. It is not enough to fear climate change and support policies to mitigate it; you are called upon to pursue the complete elimination of fossil-fuel vehicles in a decade. (I have a 2010 model car I think might last another decade, by the way. Are they going to blow it up?)

Perhaps Democrats are to be commended for following the logic of their own views to their conclusions. If you believe climate change will end life on this planet in 100 years, then ridding the world of greenhouse gases now is a noble pursuit. If you believe a mother’s actual say-so is the legal standard allowing a baby to live, then logic dictates partial-birth abortions are perfectly moral. And if you believe Donald Trump is the harbinger of fascism, then niceties are not only unnecessary in your efforts to oust him for office; niceties are actively dangerous.

So yes, there are signs the Democratic Party is going crazy. But that doesn’t mean Democrats are going crazy. Just those in the party who stand for election or help others stand for election or who comment professionally on elections. Nearly 55 million Americans of voting age describe themselves as Democrats, and surely 55 million people are not going crazy simultaneously.

One might also say Republicans have gone crazy in their own way—indeed, that has been a recurring theme in American politics since 2011. If that is so, and the Democrats are crazy, too, then the problem is a general madness afflicting the United States. That madness has had different effects on Democrats than it’s had on Republicans but comes from the same root.

Which raises an ancillary question: If Republicans and Democrats alike are going or have gone crazy, isn’t this craziness just the new normal? If an entire nation of 330 million people is nuts, then maybe the truly delusional are those of us who seem utterly sure we aren’t bonkers.

If we define “crazy” as “out of touch with or entirely at odds with reality,” then that, too, is problematic because in the 2018 midterm election, 62 million Americans voted for a Democrat—9 million more than voted for a Republican. That kind of showing would hardly indicate that Democrats are out of touch with reality, since an Election Day is one of the very few moments frozen in amber in which we can say we can see the reality of the present moment clear. It might indicate, rather, that the person who says Democrats are going crazy is the crazy one.

Now that I’ve gotten that out of the way, and given you leave to argue that I am the crazy one, hear me out: I think that some Democrats are going crazy. Not all. Some. And not necessarily the Democrats you might think I’m referring to.

For example, I do not think that the most radical Democrats in the House of Representatives, the freshwomen who are taking up all the oxygen in the chamber, are crazy at all. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, and Rashida Tlaib are leftist ideologues, full of brio, and they are using their talents as controversialists to advance their agendas. Their socialist ideas may have been discredited by experience and history decades before their births—but they’re not crazy. Bad is not crazy. It’s bad.

They have a genius for public relations—or, at the very least, for leveraging the identity-politics qualities that make it especially hard for the mainstream media to whisper any criticism of them. They dazzle with their ability to seize and hold the spotlight—or, at the very least, they are continually being placed in the spotlight so that mainstream media outlets can claim to be serving the goal of providing and promoting diversity.

As both the subjects and the objects of a liberal tokenism that ensures they have a front line of defense every time they say something outrageous or unseemly, the Freshmen Three have convinced their less dazzling and less controversial colleagues that they are the wave of the future. In some cases, those colleagues are terrified that the wave the radicals are both creating and riding will swamp them. They fear primary challenges from the left championed by the radical freshwomen, somewhat along the model of the Tea Party primary challenges to more conventional Republicans in the 2010 and 2012 campaigns.

This is the first real sign of craziness among Democrats, no matter which way you look at it. First, let’s take up the possibility that these more conventional Democrats are right and that primary challenges would be launched against them were they to show any resistance to the #Resistance. The one thing we know about 2020 is that Democrats need to be united and avoid roiling controversies within their own ranks if they are to coalesce powerfully and defeat Trump’s reelection effort. Internecine warfare during the primary season that isn’t just candidates jostling for the right to represent the party in the November election but is ideologically driven—the hard leftists against everybody else—could be ruinous.

America is a country with a closely divided electorate whose legislative chambers have changed hands.
routinely from party to party over the past 25 years (following a 40-year period of very little change). The Trump Republicans, who are deliberately polarizing, have led their party since 2016—and lost the House in 2018. Throughout his presidency, Trump has remained astonishingly static when it comes to his approval ratings of somewhere around 40 to 42 percent. Are Capitol Hill Republicans and Trump a model to be followed, or to be transcended? Yes, they dominate the news, but not in a way that has redounded to their benefit. Following their example is, therefore, a little bit crazy.

This is why there is significant reason to believe that appearances are deceiving, that the party’s hard left should not occupy its high ground, and that the facts on the ground will start shifting the party in the direction of the not-crazy Democrats. That is why Nancy Pelosi, the speaker of the house, went on 60 Minutes and dismissed the Ocasio-Cortez wing of the Democratic House caucus as “like five people.” But if those following Ocasio-Cortez are so small in number, why did Pelosi’s effort to devise a resolution censuring Omar for her anti-Semitic slitherings end in ignominy at a March meeting of the House Democratic caucus? Pelosi knows that the Democrats took the House of Representatives not by talking about the evil of fossil fuels but in general by seeming more sane than Trump and the Republicans. An inability to deal with an open anti-Semite and the possibility of a legislative obsession with presidential impeachment, along with unrealistic policy prescriptions; these do not echo the successful 2018 Democratic campaign. They all but undo it.

But there is also reason to believe that the craziness is exciting enough and fresh enough and energetic enough that it will continue to dominate the national discussion and overwhelm the natural trend toward political homeostasis. That is exactly what happened in the Republican Party in 2015 going into 2016—there was a presumption that the GOP would somehow emerge from the Trump fever dream that did not pass the test of actuality. Of course, Trump won it all in the end; it would be ironic in the extreme if Democrats decided to bet the house on their own version of extremism on the grounds that the man they hate the most in all the world pulled it off in 2016.

Mostly, though, I think the Democrats are going crazy because they are finding it hard to perceive reality plain. Plato’s allegory of the cave is helpful here. Ordinary Democrats are both titillated and frightened by the extremists in their midst. But what if they are like the people in Plato’s cave, chained to a wall in such a way that they can see only the distorted indistinct images cast by flames and cannot see the actual objects, which are mere puppets?

As Allan Bloom wrote, they “cannot distinguish between what is merely a shadow, a distortion caused by the idiosyncrasies of our mental vision or those of the reflecting medium, and what is an accurate reflection of the objects.” They will believe the shadows are monsters, or terrors, or gods to be appeased. And even their release from their captivity will not immediately show them the truth: “Don’t you suppose [they’d] be at a loss and believe that what was seen before is truer than what is now shown?”

The question for the Democrats as they head into 2020 is whether they see reality clearly or whether they are teasing and thrilling and tormenting themselves by dwelling on the potential power of their hard left to turn the Democratic electorate against the very sorts of Democrats who won seats away from Republicans in 2020. Available evidence from those 62 million votes is that the fear gripping them is the by-product of the puppet shows of our time—with the shadows cast not by fire but by Twitter and Facebook and Instagram. And that’s crazy.\*\*
How Bibi Did It

The West’s most successful politician scores again

By Seth Mandel

WATCHING BENJAMIN Netanyahu win elections has become so customary that it is easy to miss the profound significance of his April 9 victory. When Netanyahu lost to Ehud Barak in 1999—the last time he was booted from office in an election—the Labor Party alliance won 26 seats. In this year’s election, Labor won 6. There has not been a Labor prime minister in 18 years.

In the past decade of Netanyahu’s premiership—the longest consecutive time in the Prime Minister’s Office by a country mile—Bibi has done nothing less than remake the Israeli political establishment in his image. And then, on April 9, he defeated that, too.

Previous serious threats from Netanyahu’s right have come from the Jewish Home Party and Israel Beitenu. Jewish Home was formerly led by Naftali Bennett, who was Bibi’s chief of staff from 2006 to 2008, and Ayelet Shaked, who was Netanyahu’s office director during that same time and who has been mentioned repeatedly as the politician most likely to replace Netanyahu.

This year, Bennett and Shaked left Jewish Home to form another party, New Right—and it failed to break the vote threshold necessary to join the Knesset. They’re out.

Israel Beitenu has been led by the formidable Avigdor Lieberman. Until November 2018, he was Netanyahu’s defense minister. He was director-general of Likud when Bibi won its leadership two decades ago and director-general of the Prime Minister’s Office when Netanyahu was prime minister in 1996 and 1997. That party dropped by one seat.

Another center-right party was Kulanu, led by Moshe Kahlon—Netanyahu’s finance minister and a longtime Likudnik who left the party in 2014 to run against it. Kulanu lost six seats. One of the founders of Kulanu was Avi Gabbay, who was appointed by Netanyahu in 2015 to be the minister of environmental protection. Gabbay joined Labor the following year, won its leadership primary, and was at the helm for the stomping it received in April.

Netanyahu’s primary challenge was from a new party calling itself Blue and White. Among its most notable leaders was Moshe Yaalon, Bibi’s last defense minister and an experienced Likud legislator. The party’s political platform was essentially Likud minus Bibi. In the end, Likud improved on its last election showing by six seats, or 20 percent. Apparently, Likud

Seth Mandel is the executive editor of the Washington Examiner magazine.
plus Bibi is more of a winner now than it was then.

Netanyahu’s reelection was endangered by the attorney general’s announcement, barely a month before the election, that he intends to indict Netanyahu on charges of fraud, bribery, and breach of trust. That man is Avichai Mandelblit; he became attorney general in 2013, and before that, he was Netanyahu’s cabinet secretary.

Everyone outside the left in Israeli politics has been in the trenches with Netanyahu—and many have emerged from the trenches to fire on him. And he’s arguably stronger than ever, at least electorally.

In Israel, he is often derided as King Bibi. In December 2016, that moniker was the inspiration for a large golden statue of the prime minister put up as a piece of satirical guerrilla art in Tel Aviv’s Rabin Square. But who ever heard of a poten
tate who must win open, democratic elections repeatedly to stay in power? Some king. And yet: Netanyahu has been in office for 10 years. The average Israeli prime minister is in office for four. And that average is inflated by the six- and seven-year runs of the state’s founding father, David Ben-Gurion, who for the entirety of his political career presided over what was effectively a one-party state.

The best way to understand Netanyahu’s impact is as the final triumph of Revisionist Zionism, with Bibi crossing the finish line holding the baton handed to him by Menachem Begin, who had picked up where the Zionist theorist and practical politician Vladimir Jabotinsky left off nearly four decades earlier, at the time of his death in 1940. When Western leftists say their problem is only with Netanyahu, not the Israeli people, it rings false: Israelis may not identify with (or even like) Bibi personally, but their country’s political identity is deeply intertwined with their prime minister of 10 years. Left-wing author Dorit Rabinyan told the New York Times that a post-Netanyahu Israel might make many feel “orphaned,” and that she shared the feeling to some extent: “I’m anxious about it at the very same time that I’m hopeful about it.” Rabinyan is no closet rightist: Bennett, as Netanyahu’s education minister in 2017, excluded Rabinyan’s novel of an Israeli-Palestinian love story from school curricula. (This was silly; the book is nuanced about the conflict and does not include intermarriage in the plot.) Yet even Rabinyan admits trepidation about a post-Bibi future.

She is not alone. In the months leading up to the election, voters were polled dozens of times on whom they would prefer as prime minister. Aside from a couple of outliers, Netanyahu was always the first choice, often by a wide margin, even though his party was neck and neck with Blue and White.

Why? Simple. He has been in office long enough to find vindication for his policies. “The prime minister began his current stint in office in 2009 and some economists call the years since a golden decade,” read a pre-election piece in the Financial Times. “Unemployment has plunged to a record low, incomes have soared to a record high, the deficit has largely been tamed, and Israel’s tech scene has produced salacious tales of multibillion-dollar deals and lured tens of billions of dollars of foreign investment into the high-wage sector. ... Compared with the 1980s, when Israel struggled with hyperinflation and had to issue a new currency, Israelis live in an era that the OECD recently described as ‘remarkable.’”

Netanyahu has maintained Israel’s security while avoiding major wars and keeping the economy humming along. On his watch, the United States has recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and the country’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights, while pulling out of Barack Obama’s nuclear deal with Iran, which had legitimized Iranian hegemony over territory on Israel’s borders. For all the cries of Israel’s supposedly endangered democracy, the country “has actually been moving in a democratic direction,” wrote Zev Chafets, a former aide to Menachem Begin, on the Bloomberg website in February. He pointed to the most recent Israel Democracy Institute report, prepared by Tamar Hermann: Hermann “consulted 13 international democracy indexes and found that Israel held up quite well against other liberal democracies. ‘Compared to 2010, we have starkly improved on LGBT rights, and also on rights for women,’ she points out. Since Netanyahu took office, Israel has moved up seven places in the Economist Intelligence Unit’s ranking of democracies.”

What about the other complaint, that Netanyahu’s Israel is “isolated” on the global stage? There were hints of this during the Obama administration, which was trying to bring about that isolation. Netanyahu did not help himself in this regard: His decision to accept an invitation to address a joint session of Congress to denounce the sitting president’s own sig-

Israelis may not identify with (or even like) Bibi personally, but their country’s political identity is deeply intertwined with their prime minister of 10 years.
nature foreign-policy goal was a tactical mistake. But such flops are the exceptions. In October, Netanyahu accepted an invitation to visit Oman; in February, he met with Oman’s foreign minister in Warsaw. Netanyahu has also reportedly secretly met with Morocco’s foreign minister. His bromance with Indian Premier Narendra Modi, his deepening ties with China, and his more controversial alliances with nationalist leaders in Hungary, Poland, and Brazil—to say nothing of his relationship-of-necessity with Vladimir Putin—have all served to debunk the idea that he is isolating his country. And in the long run, the secret Israeli-Saudi cooperation spilling into the public sphere might be the most significant of these achievements.

“Has Mr. Netanyahu ever been wrong when it comes to security?” asked Shmuel Rosner in the New York Times after the election. “The truth is, many Israelis will find it hard to think of an example.” Netanyahu’s rejection of the “assumptions underlying the peace process” is now “considered common sense in Israel, including by Mr. Netanyahu’s political rivals.” Rosner also credits Netanyahu with sounding the alarm over the Iranian nuclear threat, putting it on the world’s radar, and galvanizing a global response—something even supporters of the nuclear deal admit.

Rosner’s list doesn’t go far enough. When Netanyahu was a Foreign Ministry official in Washington during the Reagan administration, he helped influence Secretary of State George Shultz’s hawkish turn on combating international terrorism, a crucial plank of which was holding terror-sponsoring regimes accountable. Nearly two decades before 9/11, America’s first modern war on terror was partly shaped by Benjamin Netanyahu. His initial foray into global politics came with a massive terrorism conference in Jerusalem in 1979 sponsored by the Jonathan Institute, the group he founded in the wake of his brother Yoni’s death during the heroic raid on Entebbe in 1976.

Netanyahu’s recent embrace of populist strongmen in Eastern and Central Europe is far more difficult to navigate and fraught with risk, but it, too, represents the culmination of a trend Bibi anticipated. His notion was that a peaceful Middle East would be modeled on post–Cold War Europe. “We will take our cue from the peace process between East and West in Europe,” Netanyahu told a December 1996 conference of the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe, still in his first year of his first premiership. The Helsinki process had three lessons for the Middle East. First: “Diplomacy must be based on agreed fundamental norms.” Second: “The broader the peace, the broader the security achieved. For peace and security to become a fact in Europe it had to reach from the Atlantic to the Ural Mountains.” And third: Leaders of the East and West may have “sharply disagreed,” but they “did not place any conditions on maintaining their dialogue.”

This was a preview of Netanyahu’s approach to negotiations, but it was also something else: a demonstration of the holistic ambitions of his dream for Israel. A rapprochement with the Saudis was just as critical to the ideal end state of the Arab–Israeli conflict as what was happening on Israel’s borders. And that meant Netanyahu would have to turn himself into something of a foreign-policy polymath. After all, if you wanted peace from the Mediterranean to the Gulf of Oman, you had to understand the politics and culture in between. And if this plan was to be based on a program that brought peace to Europe, you had better brush up on everything between Lisbon and Moscow.

It’s a mistake to put Netanyahu in the same category as the strongmen riding Europe’s right-wing wave. But it is not a mistake to say he learned their language and cultivated ties with them, some of whom represent the vanguard of a dangerous 21st-century blood-and-soil nationalism. “Only watching from Jerusalem, keeping a tab on his visits and his visitors, can you see just how successful Bibi has been,” Ben Judah observed at the Atlantic. “Never before have the leaders of Russia, Brazil, India, Saudi Arabia, the Philippines, and now Italy had such strong ties with Israel. Never before have they seen the leader that sits in Jerusalem as indispensable to their objectives.”

Netanyahu has been training for this. Have those who wish to replace him? That is the question that makes Israelis who disagree with Netanyahu think twice about voting against him. You might tell the guy juggling flaming chainsaws that this was a dangerous path, but you aren’t crazy about the idea of him walking away while they’re still in the air.

This is the balance Netanyahu strikes at home as well. He has always been something of an outsider to the ideological right. A pragmatist, not an ideologue, Bibi had from 2009 to 2014 slowed the pace of settlement growth to a 20-year low. He is cautious about sending troops into battle. He is risk-averse, which is what drives the peace-processors crazy. Above all, Bibi prizes stability. He has no true ideological home, so he has made his home the Prime Minister’s Office. When Netanyahu finally leaves office, he will feel adrift, and many on the left, let alone the right, fret that they will feel “orphaned.” Netanyahu’s critics and opponents, sensing the bond this creates between voter and prime minister, insist that Bibi isn’t his country’s “indispensable man.” That’s probably true. Just not quite as true as it used to be. ▶️

How Bibi Did It: May 2019
The UN and Israel in the Nikki Haley Era

The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations stood up to the most powerful anti-Israel organization in the world

By Jon Lerner

TO MOST AMERICANS, there is a certain sameness to their country's role at the United Nations, and this role is not an especially pleasant one. While many U.S. ambassadors have served ably, few have won public acclaim beyond diplomatic circles. Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Jeane Kirkpatrick clearly did. Many would add to that distinguished short list Ambassador Nikki Haley, who recently ended her two-year UN tenure.

Haley's time was marked by several achievements, from North Korea sanctions, to the South Sudan arms embargo, to financial savings and reforms. But she was probably best known for her record on Israel. In fact, Israel's UN ambassador, Danny Danon, went as far as saying, "With Nikki Haley's appointment as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, a new era was born."

Was a new era really born? If so, what was new about it? And how did it happen that the former South Carolina governor who had never been to either Israel or the United Nations before accepting this diplomatic assignment would come to earn this reputation as a pathbreaker, a reputation now widely endorsed by both friends and enemies of Israel? I have thoughts on these questions, having served as Haley's deputy and as a member of the National Security Council's Deputies Committee. I worked closely with her on policymaking throughout her time at the UN, including on the Middle East and Israel–Palestinian issues.

Myths are sometimes assets in international relations. The fiction that Taiwan is not an independent country, for example, allows us to sustain our relationship with China. In other cases, however, myths can create serious problems. On Israel–Palestinian issues, the Trump administration was determined to test some mythical propositions that many had come to take for granted and, in some cases, to refute them. Haley's prominence at the UN arose in large part from a conscious choice to reject myths that pervaded diplomacy on Israel–Palestinian issues for decades.
Haley proclaimed, ‘Last month’s passage of UN Resolution 2334 was a terrible mistake, making a peace agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians harder to achieve.’

Four factors account for Haley’s extraordinary performance.

First, she served a president for whom pro-Israel positions came naturally. President Donald Trump supported everything Haley did at the UN. Had he not, she would not have been able to do to it.

Second, Trump does not micromanage people he trusts. Trump and Haley got along quite well. They spoke frequently and he valued her counsel. On no Israeli issue did he ever stand in her way.

Third, like Jeane Kirkpatrick in the 1980s, but unlike UN ambassadors in Republican administrations since then, Haley was a member of the president’s Cabinet and National Security Council. This status gave her greater standing with her UN colleagues in New York. She was a policymaker, not just a messenger. She had a greater ability than many of her predecessors to push things through the bureaucracy in both New York and Washington, which she did frequently.

And fourth, Haley decided early in her tenure that American interests at the UN, and American principles more broadly, required steadfast support for Israel. Indeed, she came to this conclusion before her January 24, 2017, Senate confirmation.

Donald Trump had campaigned for president as an outspoken critic of the Iran nuclear deal and other aspects of President Obama’s Middle East policies. Then, in the period between the election and inauguration, a pivotal event occurred that crucially shaped thinking about the Middle East in the minds of Haley and the wider Trump foreign-policy team.

On December 23, 2016, the United Nations Security Council approved Resolution 2334. The resolution not only denounced Israeli settlement activity, but it went much further. It condemned Israeli activity in all territories acquired in the 1967 war. That included the Jewish quarter of Jerusalem’s Old City—home to the holiest site in Judaism. It’s an area that no Israeli leader would ever negotiate away.

Similar efforts had been made at the UN many times in the past without success. But this was the first resolution of any kind regarding Israel to pass in the Security Council since 2009, and the first approved resolution on Israeli settlements since 1980. Resolution 2334 passed because the United States broke with its own long-standing practice of vetoing resolutions that unfairly attack Israel. Officially, the U.S. abstained. In fact, the Obama administration orchestrated the resolution’s passage by pledging privately that it would not veto.

There were two major problems with Resolution 2334. First, America had betrayed its close ally in the very forum in which Israel is most diplomatically vulnerable—a forum that has witnessed notorious anti-Semitic scenes in the past. And second, the resolution sent exactly the wrong message to Palestinian leaders. Namely, that they don’t have to negotiate peace with Israel and can nevertheless count on using international forums to validate their most far-reaching aims, including in Jerusalem.

President-elect Trump and his team were quick to denounce the resolution. At her Senate confirmation hearing just four weeks later, Haley proclaimed, “Last month’s passage of UN Resolution 2334 was a terrible mistake, making a peace agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians harder to achieve.” She went on: “The mistake was compounded by the location in which it took place, in light of the UN’s long history of anti-Israel bias. I will not go to New York and abstain when the UN seeks to create an international environment that encourages boycotts of Israel. In fact, I pledge to you this: I will never abstain when the United Nations takes any action that comes in direct conflict with the interests and values of the United States.”

History is filled with examples of actions that produce the exact opposite of what was intended. Resolution 2334 belongs on that list. Palestinian leaders hailed its adoption. But it proved a pyrrhic victory for them, for it created a fierce backlash that set back many other Palestinian objectives.

Haley viewed passage of 2334 as a betrayal of American values and interests. She understood that the Security Council would not repeal it, but she was determined to do what she could to undo the damage. It was with that understanding that she walked into the United Nations three days after her confirmation and at her first encounter with reporters said, “It’s a new day for the United States at the UN. We will have
the backs of our allies, and we will make sure our allies have our back as well.”

Haley’s first test came unexpectedly. This was the curious case of Salam Fayyad. In her first week on the job, it came to our attention that the UN secretary general intended to appoint Fayyad, the former Palestinian Authority prime minister, as UN special envoy to Libya. This appointment made some sense. Fayyad was well respected in the Arab world and the West. Libya was a mess, and the talented Fayyad might be able to help.

Coming close on the heels of passage of Resolution 2334, however, we saw two difficulties with the appointment. First, when such appointments are made at the UN, the appointee’s country is listed alongside his name. Fayyad was listed as representing the “State of Palestine.” But the United States recognizes no such state, and the “State of Palestine” is not a member of the United Nations. We did not want to casually accept this recognition of a mythical state. Second, in Israel’s 70 years as a bona fide UN member state, no Israeli citizen has ever received an appointment to a UN position of this kind.

Such appointments require the unanimous backing of the Security Council members, and we were informed that the other 14 countries did not object and that an American decision was required immediately. Previous U.S. administrations of both political parties would likely have allowed the Fayyad appointment to happen. The question for us was just how far we were willing to take our new commitment to fighting the UN’s anti-Israel bias.

In those first days of the new administration, the secretary of state had not even been confirmed. Haley phoned President Trump aboard Air Force One and explained the situation. The president asked, “What do you think?” Haley said she thought we should object. The president replied, “Good, do it.” And that was that.

The Fayyad rejection met with considerable criticism. Some of this was thoughtful; Bush-administration veterans who had worked well with Fayyad, for example, vouched for his capabilities and wondered what the Trump team was thinking. Some of the criticism was hyperbolic; one Democratic congressman accused Haley of ethnic bias against Palestinians.

The Israeli government played no role whatsoever in this decision. The Israelis were not consulted. In fact, they were taken by surprise. I assume they believed that the Trump administration was not going to intervene, and they probably had no major objection to a reasonable Palestinian leader working on behalf of peace in Libya. After the decision was announced, however, the Israelis complimented it. Prime Minister Netanyahu said, “The time has come for parity in the attitude toward Israel, and that the Palestinian side can’t be given freebies all the time.”

One got the sense that the Israelis had begun to figure out that this might in fact be the new day at the UN that Haley had announced. The UN secretary general and the other Security Council members very much got that message.

On a personal level, Salam Fayyad was a victim of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. On a policy level, the word went out that in the matter of UN appointments, the U.S. would not allow Palestinians to be treated better than Israelis.

ONE OF THE FIRST LARGE POLICY areas we confronted was the question of whether to continue U.S. participation in the United Nations Human Rights Council. The Human Rights Council (HRC) had long been hostile to Israel and was a badly flawed human-rights institution more broadly. An organization whose membership included China, Cuba, Venezuela, and other of the world’s most oppressive regimes could hardly be counted on as a human-rights advocate. If its only flaw was ineffectiveness, the HRC would not have been so objectionable. But it was much worse. The world’s bad actors would take advantage of the council’s “human rights” imprimatur to press their own political agendas. Those agendas included protecting themselves from criticism and scapegoating Israel. From 2006 to 2016, the HRC condemned China zero times, Iran six times, North Korea nine times, and Israel 68 times.

In 2006, the Bush administration declined to seek another U.S. term on the council. The Obama administration reversed course, and the U.S. rejoined the council in 2009. When the Trump administration came to office, the U.S. was in the middle of its term. No country had ever resigned from its seat on the HRC. The question was whether we should.
Haley tried very hard to fix the Human Rights Council. When it became clear that it was irredeemably biased against Israel, she concluded that it was time to leave.

At the top levels of the administration, there was no disagreement that the HRC was a disaster. However, withdrawal from the HRC was more complicated than our earlier withdrawal from another notoriously anti-Israel UN body, UNESCO. At Haley’s urging, shortly after UNESCO declared the Jewish holy site in the old city of Hebron as a Palestinian World Heritage Site in need of protection from Israel, the U.S. announced it would withdraw from the organization. Again, as with Salam Fayyad, we did not coordinate in advance with the Israelis. We left UNESCO not at Israel’s behest but based on our own judgment that UNESCO damaged U.S. interests. Israel then joined us on the way out the door.

The HRC was a different case for two reasons. First, from its earliest days, the Trump administration was criticized by political opponents for caring little about human rights. An abrupt retreat from the United Nations Human Rights Council would have been interpreted by many as confirmation of this criticism. Second, we had heard from several pro-human-rights countries that they were keen to try to reform the HRC to make it harder for outlaw regimes to gain membership and to stamp out the anti-Israel bias. Haley was convinced that was an objective worth pursuing, and she took it on with a passion.

What ensued was a serious effort to save the Human Rights Council from itself. At the end of a strenuous year-long campaign, we ended up where we suspected we would, though we had hoped to avoid it: The U.S. withdrew. The reform effort, however, demonstrated that the administration made a good-faith attempt to fix the UN’s main human-rights organ. It also demonstrated why the world’s free countries have such difficulty advancing their principles in multilateral institutions that depend on unfree countries’ support.

Here’s how it happened: In June 2017, we went to HRC headquarters in Geneva and met with ambassadors from “like-minded” countries—mostly Europeans, with a smattering from Latin America, Africa, and Asia. They were in full agreement that we should keep dictatorships off the council, and they were embarrassed by the council’s disproportionate focus on Israel. But in the typical UN way, they sought only incremental changes. We had no interest in that.

On that trip to Geneva, Haley gave a speech in which she named the two conditions for continued U.S. participation. One was membership reform to keep extreme human-rights abusers off the council. The other was elimination of Agenda Item Seven, which was solely dedicated to Israel. No other country had an agenda item dedicated to it, and its existence showed precisely what was wrong with the council. We would not remain unless Agenda Item Seven was removed.

For a full year, the U.S. Mission to the UN held dozens of meetings to gain support for our reforms. President Trump championed it in his 2017 UN General Assembly speech. Vice President Mike Pence led a multilateral meeting on it at the UN. But all to no avail. Russia and China actively opposed our efforts, as expected. The Europeans were the bigger disappointment. They talked a big game but were never willing to expend capital to achieve serious changes, despite their strong preference that the U.S. stay on the council.

We could have accepted the status quo at the HRC—many made the argument that the U.S. would gain more by staying engaged than withdrawing. We could have accepted cosmetic changes and claimed a victory. We could have completed our term and not run for a new term. But that’s not what we were there to do.

For Haley, this was a matter of accountability. She had been transparent about her goals, and she tried very hard to fix the Human Rights Council. When it became clear that it was irredeemably biased against Israel and impervious to reforming its own membership rules, she concluded that it was time to leave. Haley understood that American participation in international forums is not something that’s taken lightly by the rest of the world. Our willingness to participate can be a major source of leverage because it’s important to other countries.

As Haley said upon the U.S. withdrawal, “Many of these [Western] countries argued that the United States should stay on the Human Rights Council because American participation is the last shred of credibility that the council has. But that is precisely why we must leave. If the Human Rights Council is going to attack countries that uphold human rights and shield countries that abuse human rights, then America should not provide it with any credibility.”
The Human Rights Council is mostly symbolic. But another matter that consumed much time and effort had more practical consequences. That was our treatment of the UN agency devoted to providing social services to Palestinian refugees, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East, known as UNRWA.

Many have long raised serious concerns about UNRWA. Instead of helping integrate children into communities—thus ending their refugee status—UNRWA uses a unique definition of refugee in order to perpetually increase the Palestinians’ supposed refugee population. It extends refugee status to descendants of refugees, regardless of their circumstances, including having citizenship in another country. This encourages multigenerational dependency on international generosity. UNRWA perpetuates the Palestinians’ mythical “right of return,” implementation of which would extinguish Israel as a Jewish-majority state. Additionally, in Gaza, Hamas terrorists have shielded their activities inside and underneath UNRWA facilities.

At the same time, UNRWA does provide education and health-care services to hundreds of thousands of children in desperate conditions. And unlike the Human Rights Council, where our commitment vacillated from one administration to the next, the U.S. had been UNRWA’s chief financial backer for decades. UNRWA also had strong defenders within the national-security bureaucracy. When the Trump administration entered office, this bipartisan and bureaucratic support for UNRWA made far-reaching changes in our approach seem unlikely.

In June 2017, Haley and I visited the Aida Palestinian refugee camp just north of Bethlehem in the West Bank. The circumstances of the children in this and other camps is truly moving. They deserve a good education and a good future just the same as any other children. The question was whether UNRWA, absent major structural reforms, could deliver it.

Events that followed made the Trump administration’s support for UNRWA less tenable.

UNRWA’s leadership and its international backers showed themselves resistant to reforms. I met several times with UNRWA Commissioner General Pierre Krahenbuhl. A pleasant Swiss diplomat, Krahenbuhl fulfilled his duty to hear the concerns of his agency’s number-one financial supporter. But he heard them with incredulity. He couldn’t fathom what we were asking of him, and we were unsatisfied with his unbending responses.

One conversation in particular encapsulated the impossibility of the relationship. In my State Department office, I directed Krahenbuhl’s attention to the Hamas terrorist tunnels that had been discovered several times in recent years underneath UNRWA school facilities in Gaza. These discoveries always happened by accident, for example, when structural repair work was going on at a school and workers dug into a tunnel. In each case, UNRWA officials denounced this illegal misuse of UN facilities and destroyed the tunnel, claiming this as proof that they really opposed Hamas’s activities.

Experts in the U.S. oil and gas industry had told me that it would be fairly easy and inexpensive to use geological equipment to detect these tunnels from the ground surface. So I asked Commissioner Krahenbuhl: If the U.S. gave this equipment to UNRWA, would he use it to expose terrorist exploitation of UNRWA facilities? His answer was “no.”

Krahenbuhl claimed that such a detection effort would be too provocative and would involve UNRWA, a social-service provider, too deeply in political and possibly military matters. He further noted UNRWA’s long-standing position that it must accommodate itself to the host government wherever it operates.

In Gaza, that’s Hamas. In Syria, it’s a regime run by a major war criminal. In Lebanon, the host government is under the powerful influence of Hezbollah terrorists. If resisting the hijacking of UNRWA facilities and standing up to exploitation by extremely bad actors were inconsistent with UNRWA’s mandate or practice, then there was real doubt that the Trump administration could continue to endlessly bankroll it.

The other big factor that led to the U.S.–UNRWA breach was the administration’s general attitude toward foreign aid. President Trump had long been skeptical of aspects of the U.S. foreign-aid program. The UN response to his decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital intensified his skepticism about UN-managed foreign aid.

Commentary
On December 21, 2017, 15 days after the Jerusalem embassy decision, the UN General Assembly voted 128–9 to condemn the president’s action. Notably, 56 countries either abstained or chose to be absent. Before the vote, Haley expressed the administration’s unhappiness with the UN’s treatment of the U.S., warning, “At the UN we’re always asked to do more and give more. So, when we make a decision, at the will of the American people, about where to locate our embassy, we don’t expect those we’ve helped to target us. On Thursday, there’ll be a vote criticizing our choice. The U.S. will be taking names.”

After the vote, she did more than take names. Our staff at the U.S. Mission in New York compiled the data on how often countries voted with us at the UN and compared that with how much foreign aid we sent to each of them. The disparity is remarkable. Just one of dozens of examples: South Africa receives half a billion dollars in U.S. aid annually but votes with us on key issues at the UN just 18 percent of the time. Haley brought this report to President Trump. He was outraged and determined to change our foreign-aid policy.

In this context, aid to the Palestinians came squarely into the crosshairs. There were few actors in the world with a grosser disparity between the size of American financial assistance they received and the extreme degree to which they rhetorically or otherwise opposed American policies. In this period, the Palestinian Authority was refusing even to speak or meet with any administration representative, yet between UNRWA and direct aid, we were sending them well over half a billion dollars.

Furthermore, the U.S. provided far more support to UNRWA than did other countries. Since UNRWA’s founding, the U.S. had donated $6 billion—vastly more than any other country. By 2017, we were giving UNRWA close to $400 million annually. Compare that with these amounts: Russia $0; China $300,000; Qatar $1 million; Turkey $1.5 million; Kuwait $5 million; France $15 million; UAE $17 million; United Kingdom $73 million; Saudi Arabia $148 million. The U.S. contribution was more than double that of the next largest donor and dwarfed that of wealthy countries that speak loudly of their solidarity with the Palestinian cause.

Despite this disparity, UNRWA still had strong defenders in the U.S. national-security bureaucracy. Many argued that this was as much of a security issue as a humanitarian one. Without U.S. support, the argument went, UNRWA schools would close and Palestinian youths would choose to become terrorists. Some Israeli officials shared that view.

In interagency debates, Haley argued that UNRWA officials routinely threatened school closings to protect its funding and avoid having to make hard budget or policy choices. We believed that if the U.S. cut funding, other countries would fill the financial gap. If not, the pressure to change would be beneficial. Further U.S. funding for UNRWA was frozen, pending the outcome of this debate within the administration.

As the debate proceeded, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the chief proponent of continued UNRWA support, made his own decision. As he had the power to do, he unilaterally authorized a $60 million U.S. donation to UNRWA—half the amount that had been previously pledged. The Washington Post headline on January 16, 2018, declared “Tillerson prevails over Haley in Palestinian funding debate.” UNRWA defenders in our government felt they’d won a victory. In fact, they had sealed the fate of their position.

In the Palestinian territories, the reaction on the ground to this U.S. “cut” was violent protest. How dare the Americans provide “only” $60 million? It was apparently lost on the protestors that, at the time, our $60 million still made the U.S. the single largest UNRWA donor so far that year. UNRWA staff members joined these protests, and pro-UNRWA advocacy organizations blamed the U.S. “cut” for Hamas-orchestrated violence in Gaza.

I phoned Commissioner Krahenbuhl and explained that such ingratitude toward his largest donor was jeopardizing further U.S. funding. He said he understood but was unable or unwilling to change course.

On August 31, 2018, the State Department announced the end of U.S. funding of UNRWA. In the end, not a single UNRWA school closed for a single day, and other countries did fill the financial gap left by the U.S. withdrawal. That was bad news and good news. It was bad that UNRWA was not subjected to enough pressure to reform. But it was good that the U.S. was no longer financing the agency, and that we had tested
and disproven the long-standing contention that an American-aid cut would create a humanitarian or security crisis.

CHALLENGING LONG-HELD but false beliefs was also the result of the administration’s biggest move in Israel–Palestinian affairs in its first two years in office: the aforementioned recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. The decision to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem was controversial, inside the Trump National Security Council, as well as around the world.

The internal debate was reminiscent of the drama surrounding President Truman’s recognition of Israel’s statehood in 1948. Back then, the State and Defense Departments, and our intelligence agencies, opposed recognizing Israeli independence, primarily out of concern about hostile reaction in the Arab world. Now, in 2017, the same departments and agencies made the same case using the same arguments against recognizing Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.

While President Truman was largely alone in his view, President Trump had supportive team members in Mike Pence, Nikki Haley, and Ambassador David Friedman. They pushed back effectively against the arguments of State, Defense, and the intelligence agencies. Trump heard both sides and made his decision.

For decades, U.S. presidents were intimidated by the argument that recognizing Jerusalem as Israel’s capital would trigger violent explosions throughout the Muslim world. Trump and key colleagues doubted this, and they turned out to be right. Violent reaction in the Palestinian territories was limited, and there was virtually none elsewhere in Arab and Islamic countries.

In international relations, challenging long-standing beliefs often frightens those who embrace conventional wisdom. This embrace makes such beliefs conventional, but it does not always make them wise.

In her speeches, votes, and actions at the UN and in Washington, Nikki Haley helped usher in a new era in U.S. policy toward the Arab–Israeli conflict. She upheld the prediction she made after her first UN Security Council meeting on the Middle East: “I am here to say the United States will not turn a blind eye to this anymore. I am here to emphasize that the United States is determined to stand up to the UN’s anti-Israel bias.”

It’s a new era because Haley challenged and disproved some important basic assumptions about Middle East policy. It turns out that the United States can support Israel strongly and still work closely with Arab states to promote common interests such as opposing Iranian threats. The Arab street is not narrowly Israel-minded and is not as volatile as long believed. The sky won’t fall if the U.S. stops funding UN sacred cows such as UNRWA. Even if future U.S. administrations revert back to the policies of the past, these old assumptions will remain disproven. That is a valuable accomplishment that will last long after Nikki Haley’s UN tenure.
Daniel Okrent says toward the end of *The Guarded Gate*, his engrossing new history of the Immigration Act of 1924, that his book is a “bleak tale of eugenics, immigration, racism, and the corrupting potential of scientific authority.” Bleak may be an understatement.

The drastic restriction of immigration to the United States in the four decades after the act’s passage is the more familiar part of his tale. “In 1914, the last year before the tumult of war disrupted the immigrant flow, more than 1.2 million Europeans had entered the country,” Okrent writes. “The 1924 law sliced it . . . to no more than 160,000.” Even that much-reduced figure can be misleading. Crucially, the law enshrined national quotas based on the ethnic composition of the U.S. population in 1890. Thus, “the lands comprising most of the Russian Empire sent 189,198 people to the United States in 1921.” Four years later, that figure was 7,346. “Some 222,260 Italians entered the country in 1921; in 1925, under the new regulations, only 2,662 were admitted.”

There had been negligible immigration from Greece before 1890, so its allowance was pitifully small. From a high-water mark of 46,000 Greeks in 1914, “the merciless mathematics of the quota limited Greece” to 100 a year. And spare a thought for the eighth Luxembourger to arrive at Ellis Island in June under the Immigration Emergency Act of 1921 (which prefigured the permanent 1924 law). He was immediately deported. The monthly allotment from the Grand Duchy was seven.

Immigration from northern and western Europe—from the U.K., Ireland, Scandinavia, France—was far less impeded, since citizens from those countries were already plentiful in the 1890 Census. The quotas, as Okrent puts it, were “what the anti-immigrant forces had wanted all along: a device that would hold the door open for those of their own ethnic heritage and nail it shut for those they despised.” And they allowed the restrictionists, however implausibly, to deny their discriminatory motives, “for nowhere in the act’s nearly ten thousand minutely detailed words could one find the terms ‘Italy’ or

---

**Saving the Nordics from the Mongrels**

*The Guarded Gate: Bigotry, Eugenics, and the Law That Kept Two Generations of Jews, Italians, and Other European Immigrants Out of America*

**Reviewed by Richard Starr**

Richard Starr reviewed The Heartland in Commentary’s March issue. He was editor of the Weekly Standard.
'Italian,' 'Russia' or 'Jew,' ‘Greece' or ‘Greek,' or any other proper-noun descriptors of the European peoples or nations the bill had targeted."

From the distance of almost a century, some of the restrictionists of our own day offer a bloodless defense of the 1924 Act. Yes, it is regrettable that millions of Jews and other Europeans kept out by the quotas might have come to our shores and escaped the slaughter of World War II—but, it is said, their heartbreaking fate was unforeseeable and the fault of Hitler. American lawmakers in 1924 were reacting sensibly and democratically to the unprecedented waves of newcomers who had arrived in the three decades before. Patrick J. Buchanan recently offered a pithy version of this argument: "All peoples to some degree resent and resist the movement of outsiders into their space... Our leaders in the 1920s understood this and took steps to halt the migrations until those who had come could be assimilated, and, in a word, Americanized. It worked."

Except that's not what those leaders thought they were doing or why they thought they were doing it, which brings us to the less familiar part of Okrent's story.

The men whose vision was embodied in the 1924 Act did not by and large believe that the immigrant masses could or even should be assimilated and Americanized. Okrent gives us the view of Kenneth Roberts, who for years had been banging the drum for restriction in the pages of the Saturday Evening Post, the largest and most influential of American magazines in those pre-radio, pre-TV days: "If America doesn't keep out the queer, alien, mongrelized people of Southeastern Europe, her crop of citizens will eventually be dwarfed and mongrelized in return.” This was not the extreme view of an outlying crank; the Saturday Evening Post was the beating heart of the mainstream media.

For the highbrow version, Okrent gives us Fairfield Osborn (Princeton, 1877), Columbia University professor of zoology and president of the American Museum of Natural History and the New York Zoological Society. In 1925, Osborn gave thanks to the philanthropist Mary Harriman (mother of Averell), winner of the Gold Medal of the National Institute of Social Sciences, whose munificence had helped make possible the great legislative triumph of the year before—the “wise, deliberate... exclusion of citizens we cannot welcome to our country.” Osborn’s concern, to be clear, was not the assimilation of the lower orders but the protection and perfection of those at the top. At last, he said, “we are tending toward the selection of the best, the exclusion of the worst.”

The Immigration Act of 1924 was hugely popular. The vote in the House was 308–62; in the Senate, 69–9. Good old-fashioned prejudice and xenophobia no doubt played a part, along with fears of Bolshevists and anarchist bombers. What really ran up the score, however, was the prestige and authority of pseudoscience.

A few Boston Brahmins had, since the 1890s, been pushing for literacy tests and other stratagems to slow the rate of immigration, but success kept eluding them. Then, starting in the years before World War I, America went crazy for the new branch of applied biology known as eugenics.

In a nutshell, the eugenicists were hereditarian extremists. Extrapolating from Darwin's theory of evolution via natural selection and the more recent laws of inheritance discovered by Gregor Mendel in his experiments on pea plants, they thought they could enhance the human race. Humanity, they believed, was built on a hierarchy of races, genetically determined. Those at the top of the pyramid (Nordics), if only they could be exhorted or induced to mate with one another, would pass their moral, physical, intellectual, and spiritual gifts to their offspring (along with blue eyes and blond hair). The lesser breeds, morally, physically, and intellectually inferior by various degrees, were unfortunately surpassing their betters in one key skill: reproduction. Even worse, they were intermarrying with their betters to produce mongrel offspring. Best that they be kept at a distance, or even sterilized. (Dozens of states passed compulsory sterilization laws for the mentally defective and were blessed with the approval of the Supreme Court, 8–1 in the notorious 1927 Buck v. Bell case."

As Okrent notes, “this ferment of racial analysis was a direct, if almost certainly unintended, product of the Darwinian revolution: once you establish that not everyone is descended from Adam and Eve—and thus not genetically related to one another—anything goes: racial differences, racial hierarchies, racial hatred.” And though eugenics may sound to modern ears like Darwin for Dummies, it wasn’t the dummies who led the parade. It was the best and brightest, good progressives, pioneering conservationists, highly credentialed scientists and intellectuals.

Mary Harriman’s subventions to the influential Eugenics Record Office in Cold Spring Harbor, founded by Charles Davenport (Harvard, Ph.D., 1892), began in 1910. Madison Grant (Yale, 1887, and Columbia Law School) introduced the idea of a “Nordic” super-race, under siege by the “unfit,” with his 1916 book The Passing of the Great Race, edited and promoted by the famous literary editor Maxwell Perkins,
who shepherded a growing list of eugenics authors at Scribner’s in between his better-known work with the likes of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Lothrop Stoddard (Harvard, Ph.D., history) produced possibly the most influential work of popularization with his sinister 1920 bestseller (also a Scribner’s–Maxwell Perkins production), The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy.

Many of these eugenics notables are all but unknown today, deserved casualties of the Nazis’ having “weaponized” their work, as Okrent puts it. But they were superstars in their day. President Warren Harding recommended Stoddard’s book. Okrent notes the observation of a 28-year-old diplomat at the time: “Nothing good can come out of modern civilization, in the broad sense. We have only a group of more or less inferior races incapable of coping adequately with the environment which technical progress has created. This situation is essentially a biological one. No amount of education and discipline can effectively improve conditions as long as we allow the unfit to breed copiously and to preserve their young.” This was George F. Kennan. He “confided these thoughts to his diary on July 13, 1932. Less than three weeks later, just five hundred miles to the southwest, in Berlin, the Nazi Party won a plurality of seats in the Reichstag.”

It’s a grim and sordid story. But Okrent, who is steeped in the political and cultural life of the period thanks to his splendid books on Prohibition (Last Call) and the building of the Rockefeller Center (Great Fortune), is a companionable, witty, and judicious guide. “Even as eugenic ideas were embraced by the untrained, the unserious, and the unbaked,” he writes, “the readiness of substantial, credentialed institutions and investigators to accept the early claims of the eugenicists made a certain amount of sense. Science only knows what it knew yesterday, as altered by what it learns today; tomorrow’s discoveries are suspended in a fog.” It probably didn’t help that millions of Americans at the time were still farmers or only a generation removed from the land—people for whom selective breeding and the culling of herds was the stuff of workaday life. Still, they should have known better. You can’t elevate humanity by treating people like livestock.

---

**Israel and the Illiberal Liberals**

**The Lions’ Den:** Zionism and the Left from Hannah Arendt to Noam Chomsky

By Susie Linfield

Yale, 400 pages

Reviewed by Gil Troy

THEODOR Herzl had one genuinely big idea that worked brilliantly. His brainstorm, now known as the State of Israel, solved the two biggest psychological problems facing the Jews. His grand Zionist solution failed to solve the Jewish Problem: anti-Semitism. Israel has become the collective Jew among the nations, attracting the kind of obsessive bigotry that individual Jews endured in Herzl’s Europe. Many, but not all. Susie Linfield’s new book, The Lions’ Den, shows that Herzl actually misunderstood the greatest practical problem facing the Jews. His grand Zionist solution failed to solve the Jewish Problem: anti-Semitism. Israel has become the collective Jew among the nations, attracting the kind of obsessive bigotry that individual Jews endured in Herzl’s Europe. Present-day anti-Semitism exposes Jew-hatred as the world’s most plastic hatred: durable, adaptable, pliable. Anti-Zionist anti-Semitism keeps mutating, serving as a surprisingly versatile ideological glue, even bonding natural en-
While anti-Zionists minimize Israel’s achievements, Linfield highlights one of Zionism’s under-appreciated miracles: how it has transformed the Jew’s image and self-image.

Her “relationship to Israel was like that of an alienated, rebellious child to her family,” Linfield writes. “Though full of anger, resentment, and feelings of superiority, she could never separate completely, and in times of crisis, she always came to its defense.”

Arthur Koestler followed a more linear trajectory. His 1946 Zionist novel *Thieves in the Night* worshiped Palestine’s new, aggressive “Hebrew Tarzans.” Thirty years later, he published a bizarre gift to anti-Zionists, *The Thirteenth Tribe*, in which he argued, preposterously, that today’s Jews were the descendants of Khazaris who converted in the 11th century C.E. In both works, Koestler sought to solve the Jewish problem—and his own Jewish problem—simply by erasing traditional Jews from history. “The Zionist as Anti-Semite,” Linfield calls him.

Linfield finds most anti-Zionist attacks on Israel shoddy, even embarrassing. Maxime Rodinson, Linfield writes, “became a less intelligent version of himself when he turned to the subject.” I.F. Stone falsely assumed that “Israelis and Palestinians shared a parallel yearning for peace.” And ignoring “actual history,” she sees Chomsky constructing a mythical place she calls Chomskyland, a “world where Arab dictators and PLO militants spent decades seeking peace and [the Israeli novelist] Amos Oz opposed it.” Chomsky, she writes, “has taken bedrock principles of the Left … twisted them into unrecognizable caricatures, and thereby betrayed them.”

In short, “the pitfalls into which so many commentators on Israel fall” include “arrogance, ignorance, remoteness, abstractness.” If the Middle East proved to be the graveyard of imperial ambitions, Linfield warns that it has become the graveyard of “clear-headed moral and legal discussion.”

These liberals disappoint Linfield because she believes in liberalism. But “there is no middle ground where political violence is concerned any more than there is with racism.” Her hero here is Haliliday. His refusal to make excuses for terrorism demonstrates for her that “realism is the assertion not the surrender of humane and even revolutionary values.” And while “the Western left has been an acute and invaluable critic” of Israeli fantasies, it “has been the worst enabler of Palestinian delusions.”

While anti-Zionists minimize Israel’s achievements, Linfield highlights one of Zionism’s under-appreciated miracles: how it has transformed the Jew’s image and self-image.
of Leon Trotsky, who coined the phrase “the Non-Jewish Jew,” was, Linfield writes, “a deeply conflicted Jew.” Deutscher remained Jewish, simply, he admitted, “by force of my unconditional solidarity with the persecuted and exterminated.” The fact that we view such behavior as neurosis incarnate is a testament to the practical effects of Zionism in presenting a new understanding of Jews as masters of their own fates.

Although this delightfully smart book offers beautifully rendered insights, Linfield has blind spots. She bashes Israel periodically and usually with one-liners that simply presume agreement. While preserving the book’s street cred with the left, these ripostes feel like virtue-signaling. To be fair, though, there’s relatively little of this in her courageous exposé of this “treacherous readiness to substitute ideology, wishful thinking, or sheer fantasy for reality.” Linfield has written a book that is shockingly heterodox for a professor of journalism at New York University, where one presumes her friendliness to Zionism makes her feel that she’s in the lion’s den.

Linfield mocks the identity totalitarianists who reason backward, justifying the crimes of those they like while demonizing those they hate. Most provocative, she sees that Israel-pounding allows “the left to sustain a blistering critique of nationalism, albeit only in the case of one small country, while simultaneously kowtowing to the anti-imperialist and stridently nationalist rhetoric of the Third World.”

This insight parallels Judea Pearl’s in another important book—Anti-Zionism on Campus: The University, Free Speech, and BDS, ably edited by Andrew Pessin and Doron S. Ben-Atar. Pearl, an artificial-intelligence expert and the father of the murdered Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, targets the irrationality of what he calls Zionophobia. “Marxist intellectuals can never forgive Israel for proving their textbooks wrong,” Pearl writes. “The entire neural architecture of BDS intellectuals is wired around the hated image of white settlers who have long disappeared from the earth (not counting the Falkland Islands). Israel is hated because the white settler must be reinvented to fit the villain script.”

Beyond scapegoating Israel, Pearl writes, “these intellectuals cannot stomach” Israel’s redemp- tive “narrative of ‘a nation rebuilding its historical homeland’ …. They cannot forgive Israel for giving new meaning to man’s existence, a meaning that transcends” postmodernists’ race, class and gender-identity-trinity.

Linfield’s anti-Zionist Jewish intellectuals also detested Israel for proving them wrong. Hoping to become citizens of the world, deracinated by history, they ended up instead stricken by Emile Durkheim’s anomie: listless, lonely, self-loathing, and stuck. They were still Jewish after all. In countering their self-images as ugly, tortured, wimpy Jews, Israel’s proud, strong sabras triggered more self-loathing in them, and this self-loathing metastasized into seething hostility.

The historical clash between modernity and Judaism spawned Zionism, and helped liberalism, too. Some Jewish liberals tried escaping what they perceived as an oppressive Judaism by feeding liberalism’s most universalistic impulses. By contrast, Zionism fused nationalism with liberalism, balancing pride in identity, community, and nation-state with commitments to freedom. Like Americans, Zionists use particularism to advance universal ideals.

In the latest universalist-versus-particularist clash, postmodern liberals deride all Western nationalists as Trumpian xenophobes. Unfortunately, too many nationalists have gone ultra, confirming the caricature. All the shouting drowns out subtler, balanced voices.

That’s what distinguishes the examples of Albert Memmi and Fred Halliday. Memmi experienced Muslim and Arab hostility too intimately to be bullied out of his Jewish identity. He appreciates having a “close kinship with one’s own people.” Halliday was too principled a liberal to be politically correct. By contrast, Linfield’s Jewish anti-Zionists wallowed in half-truths and brutal inconsistencies. Their misanthropy demonstrates the psychic cost of being People of the Book who betrayed their people and their Book, rejecting that nuanced mix of universalism and particularism the Bible teaches, Judaism embodies, Zionism champions, and Israel, at its best, lives by.

Politics & Ideas : May 2019
Man of Evin

Prisoner: My 544 Days in an Iranian Prison
By Jason Rezaian
Ecco, 320 pages

Reviewed by Sohrab Ahmari

For some people, it’s skydiving. For others, high-stakes poker. For me, traveling back to my native Iran is the crazy-risky thing I often fantasize about but would never actually do.

I’m a Christian convert and therefore an apostate from Islam. I’ve publicly traveled to Israel and spoken in defense of the Jewish state. And I work for News Corp, which the Iranian regime considers a Zionist organ that seeks to foment a “velvet revolution” against mullah-power. That’s three counts against me. If I’m ever foolish enough to fly to Tehran, it’s sure to be a one-way trip. I would almost certainly land in Evin Prison, maybe never to get out alive.

Mine is a nightmare/fantasy shared by many Iranian exiles. The very word “Evin” sends chills down our spines. Evin means brightly lit solitary-confinement cells designed to drive you bonkers. It means torture chambers where they dunk your head into buckets filled with feces and cockroaches, beat your feet with electric cords till they turn into purple bags of flesh, or play mock-execution games that drive you bonkers even faster.

“Evin” is another word for hell.

Sohrab Ahmari is the op-ed editor of the New York Post and author of the Catholic memoir From Fire, by Water.

Commentary
someone who could help outsiders appreciate a cuisine that tastes delightful but often looks awful (one of the book’s many startlingly simple but true observations).

“I could see the brochures in my mind,” Rezaian recalls. “‘Visit Iran. It’s not that bad,’ they read.” But things turned out to be just that bad, and one of the Rezaian story’s supreme ironies is that foodie culture provided the pretext the Iranian security forces used to ensnare the author. To wit, while still reporting from Tehran, Rezaian had half-jokingly launched a Kickstarter campaign to fund an avocado farm, the goal being to bring the hipster staple to the Iranian table.

The Iranian spooks, however, thought “avocado farm” was really CIA-Mossad code for committing espionage against the sacred regime. Thus did what Rezaian calls his “Great Avocado Quest” get him thrown into the nightmarish Evin.

In addition to the avocado business, the case against Rezaian included his communications with a Danish friend with the last name Rasmussen, also the last name of NATO’s then secretary-general; the time he spent poolside at various Dubai hotels (“Free sex, Jason! They drink alcohol, swim, and have sex!”); and the completely unfounded notion that he might be “Joe-ish.”

The hilarity of all this doesn’t subtract an iota from the grimness of what follows.

Rezaian for the most part escaped physical torture, but the psychological kind—the nonstop interrogations, the terror inflicted on his Iranian wife and family back home, his jailers’ attempts to deceive him into thinking his government had abandoned him—would have broken most men. What kept Rezaian’s soul and mind intact were his sense of humor and his profound, earthy humanity. When one of the janitors in Evin teasingly asked him how his doodool—the childish Persian word for penis—was doing, Rezaian immediately shot back: “He’s not bad, but he and I both miss our wife.”

The biggest question raised by the book, and never definitively answered by Rezaian, is this: Was the regime truly convinced that Rezaian was the CIA station chief in Tehran, that his talk of avocados and burgers was really code for stealing nuclear secrets and debriefing regime defectors? It seems too absurd to contemplate, and certainly some of the more senior officials he encounters seem to have been aware that Rezaian was a mere pawn in the regime’s dealings with Obama. Then again, some of his interrogators and prosecutors really did take him for a hipster foodie-cum-international spy.

Precisely because Iran’s theocrats deal only in subterfuge, conspiracy, and lies, lies, lies, they imagine everyone else operates on the same terms and with similar methods. They can’t fathom that someone might launch a Kickstarter campaign to bring avocados to Iran or that perfect strangers might donate to such a campaign out of sheer goodwill. Conversely, Americans, Rezaian included, can’t wrap their minds around a culture that is this devious, this bedeviling.

So how does a civilization whose hallmark is radical transparency make deals with such “crazy bastards,” as Rezaian repeatedly describes his Iranian captors? The best answer I’ve come up with: Don’t make deals.cep
He invented realistic theater, and now he bores. Why?

By Terry Teachout

Of all the new plays to open on Broadway in 2017, the one that has been taken up most frequently by theater companies elsewhere in America is Lucas Hnath’s A Doll’s House, Part 2. It is a “sequel” to Henrik Ibsen’s classic 1879 drama about Nora Helmer, a frustrated mother of three who walks out on her children and her emotionally null marriage in order to fulfill “my duty to myself,” famously slamming the front door behind her as she leaves forever. In Hnath’s play, Nora returns home 15 years later, having subsequently written a bestselling memoir about the evils of middle-class wedlock that made her rich and famous. In due course, she decides that she did the right thing by leaving.

The favorable reception of A Doll’s House, Part 2 was as much a foregone conclusion as is its ending, which is a quintessential example of what I call the “theater of concurrence,” a genre whose practitioners take for granted that their liberal audiences already agree with them about everything. The success of such plays is contingent on the exactitude with which the author tells his audience what it wants to hear, and Hnath obliges in every particular. Above all, the viewer is never allowed to doubt that Nora was right to abandon her family for the sake of her own fulfillment.

The commercial success of A Doll’s House, Part 2 was bolstered by the fact that it is based on a classic of impeccably progressive lineage. The original A Doll’s House, which debuted in 1879, was the first issue-driven play of ideas to win international popularity. It led directly to Henrik Ibsen’s emergence as the most discussed playwright of his day. His admirers came to include Sigmund Freud, Somerset Maugham, H.L. Mencken, Rainer Maria Rilke, George Bernard Shaw, and James Joyce, the last of whom sent him a
fan letter declaring that “your battles inspired me...those that were fought and won behind your forehead.”

Ibsen is still the best known of all 19th-century playwrights, and he continues to be regarded as a literary giant. In America, though, he is a shrinking giant, one whose plays are being staged less and less often than used to be the case. A Doll’s House was last mounted on Broadway 21 years ago, and for all its historic significance, I have never seen it professionally produced anywhere in America. It is more than likely that most of the many people who have seen Hnath’s sequel were either largely or completely unfamiliar with the original play on which it is based.

Ibsen’s decline in popularity is all the more surprising in light of the fact that he has never been more influential than he is today. Whenever you see a new play that purports to indict the spiritual emptiness of the bourgeoisie—and most latter-day British and American dramas do just that—you are seeing his influence at work. From Shaw to Arthur Miller to Tony Kushner, he is the great forerunner, the prophet of modern drama. Yet fewer directors and actors are showing any interest in his own plays, and those who do now tend to stage them in extensively altered “adaptations” like Miller’s 1950 version of An Enemy of the People that are meant to make them more palatable to today’s audiences.

For this reason, it is unlikely that the American publication of a major new Ibsen biography, even one as weighty and ambitious as Ivo de Figueredo’s Ibsen: The Man and the Mask, will lead to a revival of interest in him.* This would doubtless be true even if Figueredo’s study, which is at once ponderous and extravagantly effusive, were better written than it is. In any case, there is little reason for anyone other than a specialist to read any biography of Ibsen, who led, like so many other writers, an uneventful private life.

Born in Norway in 1828, he was a child of the bourgeoisie whose father failed in business, a disaster that appears to have left a permanent mark on his son’s personality. Dour and disagreeable, he steered clear of personal intimacy, an unusual mode of living for a practitioner of so relentlessly social an art form as theater. To read about him is to learn little that illuminates any aspect of his plays, save for the frequency with which they portray men and women who believe devoutly, as did Ibsen, in their own genius.

written after Ibsen’s middle-aged transformation into a specialist in the naturalistic prose dramas that made him world-famous. (He was 51 when A Doll’s House premiered.) Only Peer Gynt (1867) dates from his earlier incarnation as a writer of verse plays rooted in Norway’s national mythology, and of the later works, only A Doll’s House, Ghosts (1881), An Enemy of the People (1882), The Wild Duck (1884), Hedda Gabler (1890), and The Master Builder (1892) continue to be widely performed. Between them, though, they give a clear picture of what Ibsen had to say—and why his contemporaries responded so excitedly to it.

PRIOR TO A Doll’s House, 19th-century drama throughout the West had degenerated into a species of light entertainment dominated by melodramas, frivolous farces, and the “well-made” plays of such commercial hacks as Eugène Scribe and Victorien Sardou. As Shaw wrote with annihilating contempt in an 1896 review of one of Ibsen’s later plays:

The active, germinating life in the households of today cannot be typified by an aristocratic hero, an ingenuous heroine, a gentleman-forgery abetted by an Artful Dodger, and a parlormaid who takes half-sovereigns and kisses from the male visitors. Such interiors exist on the stage, and nowhere else.

It was Ibsen who showed the world that it was also possible to write realistic plays about contemporary life that dealt with serious matters in a serious way—and that these plays could attract paying customers in the way that the novels of Charles Dickens, Henry James, and Anthony Trollope appealed to mature minds who longed to see real

* Yale, 704 pages

Culture & Civilization : May 2019
life portrayed on the page.

Because Ibsen's later plays give the impression of dramatizing the effects on their characters of such political concepts as feminism and capitalism, they came to be known as "plays of ideas," just as Ibsen himself was seen as a spokesman for progressive thought. But to watch any of them is to realize that they are political in no more than the broadest of senses, and that their implicit "ideology" is far from consistent. On the one hand, A Doll's House portrays Nora as a woman in need of a fulfillment that she cannot achieve while she is trapped by marriage, motherhood, and the ghosts of received ideas about truth and virtue that haunt all of his protagonists. "I believe that first and foremost I am an individual," Nora says. "If I'm ever to reach any understanding of myself and the things around me, I must learn to stand alone."

Conversely, the title character of Peer Gynt is a vain young adventurer who travels around the world in search of himself but in the end finds nothing but emptiness within. Kenneth Tynan summed it up well when he said that Peer Gynt "remains unrivaled as a study of the fallacy that is inherent in total dedication to self-fulfillment."

It is fairer to say that Ibsen was not so much a feminist, much less a progressive, as he was an anti-populist. For him, the Victorian-era hypocrisy he deplored was a manifestation of the power of the mob to stifle the imaginations of the handful of great men and women who were born to leaven the loaf. As he declares in An Enemy of the People: "The majority is never right...The strongest man in the world is the man who stands alone." Within a few years of his death, it had become a critical commonplace that these ideas, far from being radical, were (in Mencken's words) "simply what every reasonably intelligent man thought."

Shaw felt the same way. As a critic, he championed Ibsen's plays, and as a playwright he learned much from his predecessor's willingness to skewer the hypocrisies of the 19th-century middle class. Yet in The Quintessence of Ibsenism, Shaw's 1891 tribute to the man who cleared the way for his own plays of ideas, he described Ghosts as "such an uncompromising and outspoken attack on marriage as a useless sacrifice to an ideal, that his meaning was obscured by its very obviousness."

Obvious though they now seem in retrospect, it is impossible to overstate the colossal impact that Ibsen's plays had on their first audiences. "You don't pass an hour of your present life that isn't directly influenced by the devastating blast of light and air that came with Ibsen's Doll's House," F. Scott Fitzgerald told his daughter in 1940. By then, the playwright's very name was a symbol of enlightened thought. Whenever a character in a play or novel written in the first half of the 20th century is described as being an admirer of his work—as happens in Maugham's Of Human Bondage (1915), Seán O'Casey's Juno and the Paycock (1924), and Eugene O'Neill's Ah, Wilderness! (1933)—we are meant to assume that he is a youthful idealist, perhaps naive but with his heart in the right place.

How to explain this seeming paradox? The answer is that many of Ibsen's beliefs were in fact quite shockingly radical to the members of the bourgeoisie whom he portrayed, and would remain so well into the next century. When, in Of Human Bondage, a German professor who admires Goethe above all other writers calls A Doll's House "nothing but filth...nonsense and obscene nonsense," we are meant to understand he is speaking for the Babbitts of his day, both educated and uneducated and in Europe and America alike, who were horrified by Nora's decision to turn her back on her family. They would have been no less horrified by Ghosts, the signature problem play of the Victorian era and a whirlwind of candor by the standards of its time, discussing as it does euthanasia, incest, and syphilis.

Therein, however, lies the source of our latter-day discontent with Ibsen, which is that the people who go to see serious plays today are no longer horrified by anything in A Doll's House or Ghosts. To the contrary, they sympathize with Nora and her fellow transgressors, and this sympathy cannot help but diminish the impact of Ibsen's work. Maugham himself, who later had a successful career as a playwright, pointed out in 1938 that

Commentary
kill the play that helped to diffuse them. For nothing is so tiresome in the theatre as to be forced to listen to the exposition of ideas that you are willing to take for granted. Now that everyone admits the right of a woman to her own personality it is impossible to listen to A Doll’s House without impatience.

This also helps to explain why Ibsen’s plays, in addition to having lost their power to shock, now feel too long, spelling out at length what modern viewers can easily figure out for themselves. It is for this reason that on the increasingly rare occasions when they are produced in America, it is usually in heavily abridged “adaptations” whose language is updated in inappropriate ways (I once saw a staging of Ghosts in which a character uttered the ostentatiously anachronistic phrase “sentimental crap”) and in which the sexual kinks that Ibsen left to the viewer’s imagination are sometimes made coarsely explicit.

It is no coincidence that the one Ibsen play that continues to be staged fairly regularly in America is Hedda Gabler. While it, too, benefits from careful pruning, Ibsen’s sharply observed, tightly written portrayal of a hot-tempered small-town wife trapped in a loveless marriage requires no wholesale alteration to make its dramatic effect. All that is needed is a faithful rendering of the text in modern but not colloquial English (Christopher Shinn’s judiciously trimmed 2008 version is one of the best) that makes no attempt to turn Ibsen’s harrowing tale of marital discord into anything other than what it is—a portrait of a woman who longs to “stand and shoot at the big blue sky” but cannot make anything worth living for out of her life. “I only possess a talent for one thing,” Hedda says. “Feeling dead.”

To watch a well-staged, well-translated production of Hedda Gabler is to come away with a clear understanding of what Ibsen once meant to frustrated playgoers who longed to be offered stage characters more interesting than foppish heroes and foolish heroines. But none of his other plays seems to pack the same dramatic punch. To be sure, we live with their culture-changing consequences—we know them well—but the plays themselves too often come across as static, talky exercises in bourgeois-baiting, as smug as Shaw at his worst but without his compensating wit.

Could it be that Ibsen awaits the arrival of a new generation of interpreters who hold the key to bringing his plays back to life? Even the most settled negative opinions about the continuing viability of a playwright’s oeuvre can be turned upside down in a single evening by a great stage director, especially one who trusts his material instead of feeling obliged to bend and twist it beyond recognition. It is for this reason that I continue to seek out regional Ibsen revivals. So far, though, I continue to suspect that plays like A Doll’s House and Ghosts are anti-personnel bombs that have already exploded, crumbling landmarks of an age of innocence whose time has come and gone. 

Unfree Radical

My Father Left Me Ireland: An American Son’s Search for Home
By Michael Brendan Dougherty
Sentinel, 223 pages

Reviewed by Barton Swaim

Michael Brendan Dougherty is an inventive essayist, an industrious analyst at National Review, and now a gifted memoirist. My Father Left Me Ireland, his account of growing up in New York as the son of an American mother and a mostly absent Irish father, is by turns heart-rending, droll, and shrewdly insightful. The book is written as a series of letters to the father who didn’t raise him.

Dougherty’s American mother fell in love with an Irishman, they had a son, the father left, and mother and son had to make it on their own in the exurbs of New York. His father would write and intermittently appear for a few days, or a few hours, but mostly he wasn’t there. His boyhood memories of his father are all the same, he writes: “We would meet. You would delight in your son. I would feel spoiled rotten, trying to soak up each moment together in all its detail. Then we would part. In the moments after, I would wait for want of you, before becoming quiet for days.”

Dougherty’s mother, though resenting his father, raised the boy as an Irishman of the diaspora: They listened to Irish music and read Irish literature and learned, or tried to learn, the Irish language. Her letters to Dougherty’s father
bear moving testimony to her emotional ambivalence about both Ireland and her son’s father. In one, she berates him: “If I judged Ireland on the likes of you, I’d see it bombed.” Then a few paragraphs later she asks, “Can you get ahold of the following book, _Nuachúrsa Gaeilge na mBráithre Críostaí? We’re surviving on photocopies._”

The book’s first half accords with the title’s first four words: _My Father Left Me_. The bluntness of the author’s indictment of his father, particularly when you realize that the man is still very much alive and living in Ireland, makes you wince. “You were what my mother reminded me you were,” he writes: “not here for me.”

You were not here a summer earlier, when a wild-eyed man running along Bloomfield Avenue punched me in the head. You weren’t there when the winter before that I had suffered two concussions in a week, and my mother endured the horror of knowing her only son was being hospitalized while she sat in traffic on the Tappan Zee Bridge. You weren’t there when I had to overcome being the boy in class who got teased constantly. You might have taught me to be brave or stoic. Or perhaps your presence in my life would have given me a confidence that warned off this treatment.

At one point—this was 1994 and Dougherty would have been 12 or 13—his father showed up unannounced at his Catholic school. The two spent the afternoon together, but the father left the same day. “Obviously you were in America for other purposes,” writes Dougherty. “Namely, the World Cup. And seeing a friend in Philadelphia. Couldn’t I see that adding your son to the list made a better and more noble cover story with your wife, for what amounted to a getaway to Giants Stadium with your friend?” Later in the book we learn, as later in life the author learned, the lengths to which his father had gone to see his son that day. It was no afterthought.

As a teenager, the son became coolly cynical and deliberately ignored his father’s letters and gifts. “You would send me more clothes with the word Ireland printed on them—I remember a jacket you sent for Christmas. I never wore it...You sent me a dual CD of Irish folk legend Luke Kelly’s greatest hits. I shelved it and never listened to it. I preferred Boyz II Men...What was Ireland, beyond this tidal wave of consumable stuff crashing through our home?”

In the latter half of the memoir, we learn why the title’s direct object is not _Me_ but _Ireland_. The author’s father left him, yes, but his father left him _Ireland._

In the latter part of the memoir, we learn why the title’s direct object is not _Me_ but _Ireland_. The author’s father left him, yes, but his father left him _Ireland._ Dougherty recalls the early death of his mother, debilitated by depression and the victim of an exploitive mortgage deal, and reflects that “an atom that becomes separated from a larger chemical structure is called a free radical. And that is how I felt, supercharged with this urgent longing to reconnect to something larger.”

That something turned out to be _Ireland—in a sense. The name of Ireland, for Dougherty, now signifies some grand romantic ideal of communal connection and sacrifice. The book is laced with fluent discussions of the characters and deeds of the Irish republicans who instigated the Easter Rising of 1916, the slapdash insurrection against British rule that led, a few years later, to Ireland’s independence. You wonder why Dougherty is dwelling on it, but gradually it becomes clear. The Rising’s instigators were crazy romantics and inept insurrectionists—they were defeated after a few days and most of them were killed or court-martialed and executed—but they gave themselves completely to a mission worth achieving. Thus has the romance of nationalism saved Dougherty from a detached and desiccated materialism. And that—the unironic ardor and capacity for imagination reified by an independent Ireland—is what his absentee father has given him. “When two men hide in a bathroom and pin down a column of soldiers,” he writes of the vastly outnumbered republicans of the Rising, “when a man joins the glorious madness of a doomed battle to preserve the pride of his nationality, when men march happily into the hands of their captors, and commend the executors, a dying nation rises to life.”

In the end, _My Father Left Me Ireland_ is a protest against the soulless atomization of modern liberal democracies and a cri de cœur for a more connected, traditional way of life.

**Commentary**

Dougherty is one of several influential commentators and intellectuals on the
right who, for many years but especially since the rise of Donald Trump, have leveled sharp criticisms of free-market ideologies that leave no place for man’s spiritual and communal needs and assume that economic growth can solve all social and political problems. Many of them are Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox, having discovered or rediscovered the Church later in life. Dougherty went through a period of youthful atheism, he says, but found himself in the Church again by his late teens.

Though a hardened Protestant, I find many of their criticisms perceptive and persuasive. Yet their outlook sometimes lends itself to a kind of smug attitudinizing about an American society that, for all its faults, has treated them pretty well. To take one example: Dougherty refers to the “larger cultural formation” of his upbringing—that would be America—that “encouraged a curator’s approach to life” in which “there was nothing that we were obliged to believe. No type of life that was strenuously urged on us. We could make use of our ethnic identities or not. We could draw on or reject our parent’s religion, or be coolly indifferent. We could try on any number of identities.” I share the worry that America’s elite cultural institutions have foolishly promoted the idea that personal identity is infinitely malleable. It is a source of untold folly. But would Dougherty have preferred that the identity he chose—his Catholic Irish-Americanness—had been forced on him? In fact, he was allowed to reject it; in the end, he chose to embrace it instead. This does not strike me as an egregious instance of cultural decay.

Later he writes, regarding his grandfather’s insistence on praying the Rosary almost incessantly, that “in a world where everything is plastic, everything is unserious, this adamantine stubbornness feels like a shelter.” A world in which everything is plastic and unserious? Or again: On finding out about the bad mortgage deal his mother was persuaded to sign before her death, Dougherty reflects that “in an age that had any sense of duty beyond self-enrichment,” such an unscrupulous act “would have inspired widespread rancor and war upon the wicked.” Our age has no sense of duty beyond self-enrichment?

“We are used to conceiving of the nation almost exclusively as an administrative unit,” he writes near the book’s end, a unit “measured by its GDP, its merit discovered in how it lands on international rankings.” But nations, he insists, “have souls.” I’m not sure who Dougherty means by “we,” but I don’t think the men who fight and die for the United States think they are fighting and dying for an administrative unit.

These and similar lines may be rhetorical flourishes or deliberate overstatements, but they mar an otherwise beautiful memoir. By the end, he has sweetly reconciled with his father and, though never pretending to understand the man’s absence, has forgiven him for everything. “I am happy you are my father,” he writes. Perhaps Dougherty could also learn to forgive the plastic, unserious society that is paying him to string these words together.
son, ultimately, that Moonves was turfed out of his richly compensated position—is that Leslie Moonves did not, in fact, put her on any show.

He didn’t make her the star he said he would—snap his fingers, make a call, get it done like the mogul he was. He managed to get her a small part on a one-hour pilot, something called “Blood & Treasure,” years later, but by then she knew that the leverage was entirely on her side, and she held out for something better.

Moonves did his best—we have the text messages between him and Phillips’s wheedling manager to prove it—but strangely, he could not deliver. “If Bobbie talks, I’m dead,” Moonves said to her manager. She did and he was.

Thought experiment: What if he had managed to put her on any show? What if, right now, Bobbie Phillips was a series regular on one of the many CSI or NCIS series on CBS? Or on the cop-drama juggernaut Blue Bloods? Would she have returned Ronan Farrow’s call when he was investigating Moonves for other allegations? And if that was all it took, why didn’t Moonves make it happen?

Bobbie Phillips must have felt rather like the actress Charlotte Kirk, who met Warner Brothers Chairman and CEO Kevin Tsujihara at the Hotel Bel Air in 2013, fell into a relationship with him, and likewise expected something in return.

She texted: “U said u would help me and when u just ignore me like you’re doing now it makes me feel used. Are u going to help me like u said u would?”

Back and forth it went—Charlotte Kirk asking about movie and television roles, Tsujihara deflecting and promising and claiming that he was doing his best. “I don’t usually call about casting about these kinds of roles,” he texted to her, explaining why it was unusual for the people casting a television show at Warner Brothers to receive a call from the chairman of the company asking them to cast a relative unknown in a role. “I need to be careful,” he told her.

I need to be careful. If she talks, I’m dead. I don’t usually call about casting. What peculiar, powerless sentences to come out of two of the most powerful men in the entertainment business!

This is not at all like the old-timey ways of, say, Harry Cohn of Columbia Studios. It is part of Hollywood lore—unconfirmed Hollywood lore, but still—that Cohn would often demand sexual favors from actresses in exchange for movie roles. You’re shocked, I know. But here’s the crucial difference: Harry Cohn could deliver. When Harry Cohn whispered promises to an actress on the sofa with many cushions, you can bet he kept them. It is part of Hollywood lore—again, unconfirmed Hollywood lore—that one time Harry Cohn pressed the button under his desk, and a few days later Kim Novak was a movie star.

Sure, Moonves could have called someone up and asked for a favor. Trust me as someone who had many television series on CBS in the intervening years between Moonves’s pressing the button on Bobbie Phillips in 1996 and the publication of Ronan Farrow’s New Yorker articles in 2018. If he had given me a jingle and asked me for a favor, I absolutely 100 percent without question would have done it.

But then he would have owed me a favor back. And as someone who had many television series on CBS between 1996 and 2018—all of which were cancelled—that was probably something he wanted to avoid.

Sure, Tsujihara could have twisted an arm or two and delivered on his promise to Charlotte Kirk. But that would have been odd—and out of line—for an executive whose show-business experience was limited to theme parks, home video distribution, and business development.

And that’s the difference between being an autocrat and being a bureaucrat. Autocrats like Harry Cohn expected obedience. Bureaucrats like Moonves and Tsujihara—cosseted and pampered and overpaid bureaucrats, but bureaucrats nonetheless—were political animals in the sticky web of public companies. Harry Cohn reported to Harry Cohn. Those other guys served a million masters.

The modern Hollywood mogul—like the modern executive in pretty much every other business—has just enough power to get into serious trouble, but not enough to make it go away. He can press the button, but he cannot deliver the goods. One strange by-product of the #MeToo scandal is how it revealed that two of the most powerful men in Hollywood were actually impotent.

Commentary
HEN MATT LAUER, the highly compensated host of NBC’s Today Show, was fired for sexual misconduct in the workplace, one specific detail of his office setup caught the attention of a lot of people. Lauer, apparently, had a “button” on the floor of his office near his desk. It was a small nubbin of rubber or metal that was connected to his office door. With a discreet tap, he could make the office door shut quietly and, it was suggested, keep anyone outside from barging in. People with more lurid imaginations wondered whether it could also lock the door from the inside.

In those minds, the scene went something like this: Innocent underling is lured into the sumptuous office of the big boss. The boss, pretending to be busy behind his desk, waves the underling in and motions for her to get comfortable on the sofa with its many cushions. She doesn’t see his foot, under his desk, press down on his secret button. She doesn’t notice the door swinging softly shut, but when she hears the click of the lock, her eyes dart to the door, but by then it’s too late. The boss is already on the sofa next to her—how did he get there so fast?—and he’s already telling her that she’s the most impressive intern he’s ever seen, and that she’ll have a big career, and that she’s very pretty, and that his own marriage is a complicated and loveless situation, and also, did he mention, he’d really like to help her move up the ladder?

None of that could have happened, of course, without The Button. Actually getting up from the desk, crossing over to the door, shutting it, and then turning the lock? Too obvious! Too Bond-villain! As he shut the door, he’d almost certainly catch the eye of someone in one of the cubicles outside, leading to an awkward exchange of glances. And then there would be the long walk to the sofa with its many cushions, all of which could be used by the now-alert underling to create a pillow barrier between her and the big boss.

It’s not clear whether Leslie Moonves, the former chairman of CBS, had a button under his desk, but I’m pretty sure he did. Moonves was fired from his job last year amid a cascade of news reports and gossipy magazine pieces, almost all of which described scenes very much like the one above: a little rushed small talk, the hand on the knee, the boilerplate compliments, the pro-forma promises, and then the move to make it all explicitly sexual.

And transactional. When the end finally came for Moonves—after decades of spectacular success at CBS, where he was the architect of robust growth and the hero of CBS shareholders—it came because in the case of at least one woman he was accused of assaulting, he did not live up to his end of the bargain. Whatever promises were made, after the button went down and the office door whooshed quietly shut, were not kept.

“Be my girlfriend and I’ll put you on any show” is what Bobbie Phillips told investigators and reporters Moonves had said to her, at some point between the office door’s closing and her performing a sexual act on him. It’s not terrific dialogue—it’s what we in the screenwriting business might call “a little too on the nose”—but it’s a pretty clear verbal contract. And the reason we know any of this—the reason Bobbie Phillips consented to interviews with reporters; the reason the text messages between her manager and Moonves became public; the reason

With this issue we begin a monthly column on the inner workings of Hollywood by the veteran television writer-producer Rob Long.
YOU DESERVE TO KNOW THE TRUTH...

Anti-Zionism Is Racism

Anti-Semitic attacks that kill Jews in a synagogue are fundamentally no different than attacks on Zionism—Israel's right to exist. They're both racist acts of hate.

Anti-Semitism calls for the annihilation of the Jewish people—whether that is by murder or destruction of the Jewish state. Those who call for endangering or eliminating any ethnic group—by either the political right or left—are guilty of racism.

What are the facts?

Zionism is the belief that the Jewish people have a right to self-determination—to the State of Israel in their millennia-old homeland. According to the U.S. State Department, anti-Semitism is a form of racism directed at Israel using demonization, delegitimization or double standards. This form of anti-Semitism appears in numerous guises—usually false accusations—from both the radical right and radical left. The objective of anti-Zionist attacks is to deny the right of the Jewish state, among all the world's nations, to exist.

Attack #1: Israel is a colonial state. This assertion bespeaks a double standard, as well as a lie. No campus demonstrators protest Turkey's military colonization of Crete, nor China's occupation of Tibet. Yet Israel is falsely accused of colonizing its own ancient homeland. In fact, Jews are the indigenous people of Palestine—survivors of the oldest sovereign state in this land more than 3,000 years ago, with continuous residency since then. Indeed, Zionism is an anti-colonialist movement, having fought Roman, Crusader, Ottoman, British and Jordanian imperialism.

Attack #2: Israel stole Palestinian land. This attempt to delegitimize Israel ignores the fact that aside from private land holdings, the Palestinians have never had sovereignty over any territory. Therefore, they do not “possess” public lands in present-day Israel or Judea and Samaria (the West Bank). The territory controlled by Israel today was settled on land that Jews owned or purchased, was public land granted by the British Mandate for Palestine, or was captured when Israel defeated invading Arab armies from Jordan and Syria in 1967—all legal acquisitions under international law, to be resolved by negotiations.

Attack #3: Israel's claims to the Holy Land are religiously based. Many oppose the claim by some Jews and Christians that Israel's right to exist springs from biblical authority. Yet Zionism is largely a secular movement, and Israel's right to exist is also supported by indisputable legal, historical and humanitarian rights. While Israel's state religion is indeed Judaism—and it is the world's only Jewish state—it joins 40 other nations, mostly Muslim, that designate a state religion, also including Costa Rica and England. Above all, Israel is not a theocracy, like Iran, but a secular democracy.

Attack #4: Israel is an apartheid state. This attempt to demonize Israel is false on its face: Israel is the most diverse state in the Middle East. Its citizens of all races, genders, ethnicities and religions enjoy equal civil rights—more freedom than in most of the world's nations. Arabs serve in Israel's legislature, the Knesset, and Supreme Court. Yet who criticizes the Palestinians' apartheid demand that all Jews be cleansed from their ancient biblical homelands of Judea and Samaria? Double standard?

Attack #5: Jews are members of a religion, not a real “people.” Whereas Jews have always been united by a belief in Judaism, the Bible speaks of Am Yisrael—the people of Israel—ancient Hebrews who built a sovereign nation, as well as legal, economic and social systems. Jews are also united by the Hebrew language. Contrary to this delegitimization attempt, Jews are a distinct people who also share a religion.

Attack #6: Some Jews oppose Israel, so that can’t be anti-Semitic. Just as blacks, Muslims or any group can express unjust racial or ethnic bias against their own people, so can Jews. Jewish ultra-orthodox Neturei Karta sect members oppose a Jewish state before the Messiah arrives. Other Jews, such as members of Jewish Voice for Peace or Students for Justice in Palestine, object to Zionism based on the false and slanderous accusations listed above. The fact remains that specifically targeting Jews—and the world's only national refuge for Jews—is a form of racial bias, in this case anti-Semitism.

Attempts to delegitimize Israel—whether in the United Nations, college classrooms or by the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement—are markers of racist anti-Semitism. Good people will heed the 1967 exhortation of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.: “The whole world must see that Israel must exist and has the right to exist and is one of the great outposts of democracy.”

This message has been published and paid for by

FLAME Facts and Logic About the Middle East

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

FLAME is a tax-exempt, nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization. Its purpose is the research and publication of facts regarding developments in the Middle East and exposing false propaganda that might harm the United States, Israel and other allies in the region. You tax-deductible contributions are welcome.

To receive free FLAME updates, visit our website: www.factsandlogic.org
Please join us
Sunday, May 19, 2019
Our 4th Annual Conference with

Robert Alter  
Translating the Hebrew Bible

Micah Goodman  
Catch-67 and the Future of Zionism

Dara Horn  
Writing Jewish Fiction

Jack Wertheimer  
The New American Judaism

Ruth R. Wisse  
Jewish Intellectual Responsibility

Dennis Ross and Amos Yadlin  
Israel and the Middle East Now

Museum of Jewish Heritage
36 Battery Place, New York City

$250 per person  Includes breakfast, lunch, and wine reception.

Questions: info@jewishreviewofbooks.com

www.jewishreviewofbooks.com/event