THE FAILURE AT THE END OF HISTORY

WE THOUGHT THEY’D BECOME MORE LIKE US. INSTEAD, WE’VE BECOME MORE LIKE THEM.

by Abe Greenwald
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The Berlin Wall was constructed in the year of my birth, 1961. It was gone by 1990. Which means that I’ve lived longer in a world without the Berlin Wall than I lived in the world in which it served both to imprison millions and to symbolize the ideological unfreedom that was imprisoning billions. The thing is, the Berlin Wall didn’t seem like it was something new by the time I came to know it was there in the early 1970s. I hadn’t seen it being put up, and so to me and to people like me at the tail end of the Baby Boom, it seemed like it had been there forever, like the Great Wall of China or Stonehenge.

Similarly, global Communism didn’t seem like a rickety experiment that would collapse of its own internal contradictions, even though that’s what George Kennan had suggested would happen when he proposed “containing” it in 1947. As the great struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union wore on, the idea it might just end, kind of just like that, wasn’t even a matter for discussion or even conscious thought.

The truth is that we were woefully unprepared for the victory the United States and the West achieved in the Cold War. We did not really think there could be a victory on such a scale, with our enemy not only vanquished but literally (to use an image from The Communist Manifesto) melted into air. Just as nothing like the Soviet Union had been seen before on this earth, there had never been anything like its sudden disappearance. Without a shot fired between the great antagonists, the Evil Empire evaporated. That is not something that evil does; and it’s not something empires do either.

Evil never dies. Empires collapse over time. What had happened was something new.

A political consensus developed, shared by Clinton Democrats and Bush Republicans alike, that “freedom” had triumphed and that therefore “freedom” would be the story of the 21st century. But what kind of freedom? There was no consensus on exactly how to help Russia and its former vassal states to achieve Western-style freedom—not to mention China. Achieving the rule of law and creating self-sustaining institutions to undergird democratic values would be a multi-decade project. In the meantime, what about the free market? What about private investment? Couldn’t we teach these countries how to be capitalists, and wouldn’t the capitalism basically help create the democracies?

As Abe Greenwald details in his brilliant cover essay, “The Failure at the End of History,” the missionaries went native. They might have thought they were bringing liberty to the world, but it turned out that many of them were surrendering some of the key building blocks of liberty—sanctity of contract, the right to own one’s own property (intellectual property, in this case)—in pursuit of a different core value. That core value was best expressed by China’s Deng Xiaoping as he began taking his country down a different path away from Maoism: “To get rich is glorious,” he had said.

There was, for a time, an idea that those who went abroad after the end of the Cold War in search of economies to conquer were somehow acting primarily out of deep virtue rather than naked self-interest. It was an amazingly short hop from helping open closed markets to helping dictatorial regimes control their own people with our technology and taking money from anti-Democratic potentates to advance their interests in the United States. Perhaps that is why we barely seemed to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the civilian onrush that brought the Berlin Wall down.

At this moment, three decades later, it feels like we blew it.
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To the Editor:

WILFRED M. McCLAY presents two competing views of slavery in the American South (“How the New York Times Is Distorting American History,” October). One held it to be a quasi-feudal institution practiced by a decadent plantation-owning class (having mutated from English service in husbandry in the 16th century and indentured servitude in the Chesapeake during the 17th), and the other, as McClay states, a “source of added wealth for the relentlessly profit-seeking proto-capitalist Southern planters.”

Early-19th-century abolitionists promulgated the first interpretation, because although they regarded slavery as morally repugnant (largely motivated by their evangelical Protestant faith), to advance their cause they thought it best to argue that slavery threatened the economic self-interest of Northern whites, and not rely on appeals for equality, human dignity, and freedom. They cast slavery as inherently backward, unproductive, and unprofitable, and as retarding the economic development of the United States as a whole.

American historians of the late-19th and early-20th centuries, including Charles and Mary Beard, Ulrich B. Phillips, and Woodrow Wilson, would later draw heavily on this description. Keen to facilitate reconciliation between North and South, they contended that what precipitated the Civil War was a combination of high-minded principles such as states’ rights and practical issues such as tariffs—an interpretation that lent the two sides a degree of both nobility and culpability. Ending slavery did not necessitate a bloody conflict, as slavery’s very inefficiency implied it would have peacefully died out.
once Southern aristocrats could no longer afford to sustain it. Offered as a partial justification for the Confederacy, this view echoed almost precisely Karl Marx’s earlier analysis in 1861.

Robert Fogel (Nobel Prize, 1993) debunked all this. Protecting slavery dominated the actions of Southern representatives in Congress throughout the antebellum period. Waves of immigrants arriving in the North fueled its growing demographic dominance, which not only made Lincoln’s election victory possible, but augured the ascension of even fiercer opponents of slavery in the future. Only secession could guarantee slavery would survive.

Moreover, sifting through plantation accounts, Fogel (together with his collaborator Stanley Engerman) demonstrated that by and large, plantation owners were neither cruel sadists nor benign paternalists, but amoral rational economic actors. Far from backward, southern plantations were highly profitable and models of economic efficiency. To extract more labor at the lowest possible cost, plantation owners pioneered time-motion studies and the scientific study of nutrition. As exploiting slaves generated higher surpluses than could be achieved by relying on free labor, plantation owners would never have voluntarily chosen to free them. The Civil War and its outcome were necessary to ensure slavery’s demise.

It is no small irony that false depictions of slavery invented by those who wished to abolish it would later be revived by those asserting an equivalence between the two sides to the Civil War, or that apologists for the Confederacy would rely on many of the same arguments made by Marx and his disciples. The New York Times’ “1619 Project” is not the first time that inaccurate portrayals...
of slavery in the American South have been deployed to further a ris-
able political agenda.

Michael Ben-Gad
University of London

Wilfred M. McClay writes:
I’m grateful to Professor Ben-
gad for his thoughtful and inter-
esting response to my article about the 1619 Project. I don’t think that, at bottom, we disagree about the main things. I would say, though, that he organizes the historiogra-
phy of slavery a bit differently than I would. I would want, for example, to point out that a strictly eco-
nomic analysis of the profitability or unprofitability of slavery never was and never would be sufficient to decide its fate. The religious element in abolitionism was not inci-
cidental but absolutely central and essential, especially in the antebel-
lum years. Evangelical religious zeal was the propulsive force that
drove the abolitionists of that time; they saw their movement as a holy war, with God’s prophets battling against clear and present evils.

In any event, I want to stress that my intention in my article was not to sort out the great tangle of slavery historiography, but simply to point to the existence of that tangle, as proof that the study of slavery has for many years, the better part of a century, been one of the most vibrant and active areas of American historiography—con-
trary to the 1619 Project’s assumptions. Those debates will continue, scholarship will continue to de-
velop, and presumably many different flowers of interpretation will continue to blossom. That process will go better if organs like the New York Times stay out the matter and allow the subject to be treated with a minimum amount of politiciza-
tion and publicity-seeking.

Antifa and Communism

To the Editor:
My family lives in Tacoma, Washington, and we have relatives in Portland, Oregon. Nat-
urally, we see and hear a lot about Antifa. My thought on Warren Henry’s well-written article is that Antifa is not as amorphous as many journalists and others seem to believe (“The Curious Case of Andy Ngo,” October).

Those in Antifa are well organ-
ized and well funded, and they have cells all over the country. A review of photographic and video news stories shows several of their leaders appearing in multiple venues around the United States. They have learned that if they lie about their organization and hide the identity of the leadership, then journalists, most of whom are un-
willing to do any stories critical of leftist individuals or groups, will not do much investigative research to find more facts. Even a cursory reading of the written and online materials distributed by Antifa, however, show they are not “anti-
fascists”; they are Communists.

Indeed, Antifa is just the street-
violece subset of a larger Com-
munist movement. It follows the well-established practices forged by Communist espionage agents dur-
ing the Soviet days. Back then, agents were under the control of layers of handlers. So it is with An-
tifa. Additionally, as with espionage agents, the source of funding for An-
tifa members is opaque. Somehow, the group is able to send its leaders around the country, provide income and expenses for members who have no visible means of support, main-
tain websites, and produce written publications. Willem van Spronsen, the man who tried to firebomb the detention center for illegal immi-
grants in Tacoma, was a particularly violent Antifa member who was able to obtain firearms despite being barred by court order from possess-
ing any. Although many who show up for the periodic riots are not full-time employees of Antifa—in the way that a soldier may be a full-
time member of an army—they still receive tactical training. Someone is responsible for that training, just as someone is in charge of indoctrina-
tion and organization.

Henry’s article was mostly spot-
on, but he should not underesti-
mate the ability of Antifa’s handlers to organize and train substantial numbers of violent, and sometimes deranged, thugs and send them to the streets. Perhaps they are just warming up for 2020, hoping that the 1968 riots in Chicago will be nothing compared with what they have in store.

Lester Farrell
Tacoma, Washington
Warren Henry writes:

I THANK Lester Farrell for taking the time to respond to my article. The public should be more concerned about Antifa. I mentioned in the lead paragraph that their activities were classified as “domestic terrorist violence” by the Department of Homeland Security during the Obama administration to emphasize that the threat is not some bit of hype spun up by Republicans.

That Antifa is in some sense amorphous does not exclude their being well organized, let alone dangerous. In the Internet age, it has become easier to stand up movements as decentralized networks. In the worst-case scenario, this structure can be seen in how al-Qaeda was organized; a more benign example would be the Tea Party.

As for characterizing Antifa as Communist, it may depend on how literally Mr. Farrell means the term. As noted in my article, the name is taken from Antifaschistische Aktion, which was affiliated with the German Communist Party in the early 1930s. Antifa’s tactics borrow heavily from black-bloc groups of the sort that rioted during the 1999 riots against the World Trade Organization in Seattle. The black bloc, like the later Occupy movement, often describe themselves as anarchists. Yet their activism and violence always seem to be directed against global capitalism, with governmental bodies targeted only as an adjunct to global capitalism. However Antifa might self-identify, their politics are the same far-left politics of Communists and the black bloc.

Mr. Farrell also notes that Antifa’s funding and organizational support are opaque, a matter that establishment journalists are not interested in investigating. On this point, I can say only that the left is traditionally more oriented toward and better at political organization and networking than the right, perhaps because the left is more oriented toward collectivist thinking. It is why, for example, one found anti-Zionists among the anti-war movement of the mid-2000s, the Occupy movement, Black Lives Matter, and the Women’s March. The hard left makes efforts to insinuate itself into any left-leaning political project. If contacts between this broader web of the hard left and Antifa were uncovered, I would not be particularly surprised—except by the notion that someone in establishment journalism would devote resources to the story.

Henry D. Fetter
Los Angeles, California

Ilya Shapiro writes:

HENRY D. FETTER is right. In presenting my history of Supreme Court nominations, I reversed the order of consequential events in that important year of 1916. There were many reasons that Brandeis’s nomination was so controversial and prompted that first hearing, including anti-Semitism and, as Justice William O. Douglas would later write, that he was perceived as a “militant crusader for social justice.” A then-unprecedented four months passed between Brandeis’s nomination and his Senate confirmation. Charles Evans Hughes, meanwhile, was not just the first and only sitting justice to be a presidential candidate, but he went on to be secretary of state and returned to the high court as chief justice in 1930. In that role, Hughes orchestrated the Court’s realignment along pro–New Deal, government-intervention lines in a way that belied his (overstated) conservative reputation—a key part of the Supreme Court’s constitutional corruption that was the central narrative of my essay.

Brandeis’s Nomination

To the Editor:

WHATEVER the reasons for the Senate’s unprecedented decision to hold public hearings on the nomination of Louis D. Brandeis to the Supreme Court, they did not include, as Ilya Shapiro writes (“Crisis at the Supreme Court,” October 2019), “the resignation of a justice (Charles Evans Hughes) to run against a sitting president.” Brandeis was nominated in January 1916 to fill the vacancy created by the death of Justice Joseph Rucker Lamar, and a Senate subcommittee convened in early February to consider the nomination. Justice Hughes did not resign from the Court until June of that year, when he accepted the Republican nomination for president.

Henry D. Fetter
Los Angeles, California
To the Editor:

PRESIDENT Harry S. Truman's wildly exaggerated claim regarding his role in the creation of the State of Israel (“I Am Cyrus,” Moshe Y. Soloveichik, October) is quite ironic in view of how small a role he actually played. Certainly Truman’s speedy de facto recognition of Israel following its establishment boosted the morale of many Israelis (and their American supporters). But that recognition was of little concrete help in the face of five invading Arab armies that were vowing to destroy the newborn Jewish state. Truman’s arms embargo against Israel had a much greater impact on the events of 1948 than his recognition of the new state’s existence.

Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett bluntly complained to U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall that the Jews were “carrying on the fight in Palestine ourselves without any aid whatever. We had asked for arms; but they had not been given; we had asked for military guidance, but it had been withheld; finally, we had asked for armor plating for buses, but even this had been refused.” To declare that armor plating, which would have shielded civilians from being massacred (as 79 Hadasah doctors and nurses were, in April 1948), was a “weapon” and therefore subject to the embargo was almost inconceivably cruel.

Truman’s harsh stand forced the Israelis to look elsewhere for the arms and ammunition they needed to survive. The Soviets, for their own reasons, stepped in. “They saved the country, I have no doubt of that,” David Ben-Gurion later said of the Soviet weapons that arrived via Czechoslovakia. “The Czech arms deal was the greatest help, it saved us and without it I very much doubt if we could have survived the first month.” Likewise Golda Meir wrote in her memoirs that without the Soviet weapons, “I do not know whether we actually could have held out until the tide changed, as it did by June 1948.”

I certainly would not conclude that Joseph Stalin deserves to be hailed as a modern-day version of Cyrus, but Harry Truman certainly doesn’t, either.

Moshe Phillips
National Director
Herut North America (U.S. Division)—The Jabotinsky Movement

To the Editor:

ABBI MEIR Y. Soloveichik made a mistake in invoking Mark Twain’s masterpiece of impish satire to support his claim that, as his column’s title states, “The Land Waited for the Jews” (September). Is Soloveichik familiar with the prevailing tone of the work? Would he have us regard as serious art criticism Twain’s rant about Michelangelo in the same volume?: “He designed St. Peter’s; he designed the Pantheon, the uniform of the Pope’s
soldiers, the Tiber, the Vatican, the Coliseum, the Capitol, the Tarpeian Rock, the Barberini Palace, St. John Lateran, the Campagna, the Appian Way, the Seven Hills, the Baths of Caracalla, the Claudian Aqueduct, the Cloaca Maxima—the eternal bore designed the Eternal City, and unless all men and books do lie, he painted every thing in it!”

Does Rabbi Soloveichik believe that the author put aside the satire to adopt the tone of Tocqueville to describe the Holy Land? The visit Mark Twain describes took place in September, during the drought season, when large stretches of the terrain are brown and parched. The location of villages on hilltops, hill-sides, and the edges of spurs, away from fields and pasture lands, gave the landscape a markedly different topography from that of the North American farm. Twain very likely knew that. His description is consistent with the recurring gimmick of the book: presenting the American encounter with the Old World by highlighting (for comic effect) the absurdities that result from viewing all through the distorting lens of American manners and expectations. One could, with equal justice, declare Egypt uninhabited after a visit to the Nile Valley in flood season. *Innocents Abroad* endures as a comic masterpiece, but in this case the joke is on Rabbi Soloveichik and *Commentary*. Soloveichik may believe, mistakenly, that the land was uninhabited and desolate before the First Aliyah. Nevertheless, treating Twain's humorous mischief as if it were sober, serious, and reliable reporting, will not convince those who believe otherwise.

MICHAEL YOUNG
West Hartford, Connecticut

Meir Y. Soloveichik writes:

**THERE HAS** been a recent effort to diminish Harry Truman's legacy regarding Israel's founding. Some critics have emphasized Truman's caustic comments about Jews in the president's diary, and others, such as Moshe Phillips, point to the United States' maintaining its arms embargo during the War for Independence. Yet to level these criticisms is to view history anachronistically, in light of the even more robust American-Israel relationship today. The fact remains that Truman overcame not only some of his own prejudices, but also the forcefully expressed view of George Marshall, the man he worshipped, in order to support Israel's creation at the United Nations and to recognize it at its founding. That he did so is worthy of our admiration and our gratitude; and he did so because he was inspired by the story of biblical Israel, which began with Abraham's journey and concluded with Cyrus's call to return.

Could Truman have done more? Certainly. But he could also have done much less, and it is very possible that the administration would have taken a more anti-Israel position had Roosevelt still been alive. When FDR passed away, and much of America could not come to terms with the fact that Harry Truman would replace him, it was Eddie Jacobson who told the media, “I wish they knew him as I do.” Knowing both the virtues and flaws of Truman allows us to judge him gratefully, 70 years later.

Michael Young strangely insists that the barren country that Mark Twain encountered is entirely in character for the Holy Land in September. Yet it is that very time of year set aside by the Bible for the harvest festival. Had Twain visited the region at that time of year, in the biblical age, or during the existence of the Second Temple, he would have seen a Galilee bursting with agricultural abundance. This, of course, is not what he saw in the 19th century. But it is exactly what can be seen in September in Israel today. Moreover: Even once arid areas, such as the Negev desert, where crops never grew, now attract the wonder of the world in its at least partial fulfillment of Isaiah's prediction that God would make Israel's “desert into Eden, and its wilderness into the garden of God.”

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*Commentary*
OH, FOR the age of the blogger, back when the Internet was youngish! The Web, we are told today, was more innocent back then, purer, better. Individuals could slowly build an audience of loyal readers by writing a public form of a diary, albeit one more navel-gazing and therapeutic than fact-based, more Oprah than Pepys.

Among the most popular of the confessional sites in the early 2000s were the so-called mommy blogs, where women offered their readers real-time descriptions of their lives as parents, along with peeks inside their marriages and domestic routines. Their tone was frank and insouciant, and their readers soon came to feel they knew these women personally, and felt invested in their lives.

For a few years, the mutual emotional investment between blogger and audience worked well. The women who read the blogs felt they had created a supportive community of real moms tackling everyday domestic challenges with humor and grace. The bloggers felt liberated to write publicly about deeply private matters because readers rewarded their revelations with supportive comments and paens to the power of womanhood. The overall attitude of the mommy-blogger brigade, most of whom were stay-at-home moms, was one of defiance: They might have embraced the trappings of the 1950s Stepford Wife, with their child-centric lifestyle and suburban homes and breadwinning husbands conveniently in the background, but they would not be held to those outdated standards of female behavior.

The mommy bloggers didn’t prepare martinis for their husbands after work. They proudly drank them themselves at daytime playdates while their husbands were still at the office. By 2006, this had become enough of a trend that the New York Times labeled these women “Cosmopolitan Moms,” and if the stories of them swilling cocktails while their children ran around were true, the book The Three-Martini Playdate, published in 2004, wasn’t a parody but a how-to guide.

Melissa Summers, who blogged at a site called Suburban Bliss, frequently boasted about hosting “Bloody Mary playgroups,” and as she told the Times: “It is saying mothering will look however I want it to….It might just be a way of weeding out the mothers who are righteously indignant about what other people do. I know I don’t need more mother guilt or mother judgment in my life.”

Other popular mommy bloggers agreed. “I’m an open book on my blog,” Melissa Brodsky, who blogged at rockanddrool.com, told the Free Press. Indeed she was, writing in graphic detail about her sex life with her husband and her son’s learning disabilities. “I found my voice,” she said. “I realize that I can say what I want and people aren’t going to hold it against me, and if they do, I don’t care. I’ve realized that my opinions do matter and that I can really say how I feel.”

It was precisely that lack of concern about

Christine rosen is senior writer at Commentary.
readers’ own opinions that began to wear on many fans of the mommy blogs. Readers noted that Summers frequently got into altercations with other parents for posting images of their children on her blog without their permission, disagreements Summers insisted on making public.

Her airing of grievances with other parents seemed to contradict her own claims to embrace non-judgmental parenting. “She sounds annoying,” one commenter posted about her on a popular parenting forum. “She sounds mentally ill,” wrote another. In fact, some of the best-known mommy bloggers were struggling with mental illness. In 2018, the blogger Amalah wrote about her attempted suicide via an overdose of prescription drugs, posting it just under a cheerful video of her son’s birthday party the day before. The number of mommy bloggers who crashed and burned as they wrote is too great to count.

Clearly the medium attracted people with a predisposition for attention-seeking and latent narcissism. But trying to put an independent, rebellious, feminist gloss on a role that by its very nature curbs one’s mind and body created strain for many bloggers, some of whom began to detail the breakdown of their marriages and their own mental health in real time.

The most notable meltdown was that of Heather Armstrong, a.k.a. Dooce, who parlayed her marriage and mental breakdowns into a book deal (It Sucked and Then I Cried: I Had a Baby, a Breakdown, and a Much-Needed Margarita) and then later went on to write another book about experimental medical treatments for her depression. For her part, Summers had to stop blogging or risk losing custody of her children after her marriage imploded. Her online description of herself now notes that she “went on the press circuit for her book without my kids because it’s possibly the best shirt any of the kids have ever owned.”

Whether mommy bloggers or Instagram moms, there was always significant risk of emotional fallout for the families who share their lives with them. Bloggers like Amalah claimed to have received their children’s “permission” to post about them online, but how can a child give fully informed consent about such things? And how will those children feel when, as adults, they read the graphic details about the collapse of their parents’ marriage or their mom’s complaints about her lackluster sex life?

Mommy bloggers were largely seeking attention for themselves. Instagram moms are more mercenary, using their children as bait to attract corporate sponsors all while strenuously pretending that life has no sick days, dirty countertops, or cranky children. The commodification of intimacy on Instagram creates its own sort of tyranny because it demands perfection, not mess.

And yet there are echoes of the confessional urge of the old mommy blogs on social media. Popular Instagram mom Hannah Carpenter posted a picture of herself and her son with the caption, “It’s no secret that Tom has been the toughest of my kids to parent, often leaving me feeling as if I am a ‘crap mom’,” as he recently referred to me.” But unlike the old mommy bloggers, who would have spiraled into a description of their own feelings about their kids, Carpenter is all business. She declares she isn’t a crap mom and then offers “a little plug for this shirt he’s wearing from @shoparq because it’s possibly the best shirt any of my kids have ever owned.”

Summers is now on Instagram and Twitter. Her description of herself now notes that she “went on the Today Show to tell America she thinks it’s okay to have a glass of wine while your kids play together. Turns out America does not entirely agree.” The wine wasn’t actually the problem. The whine was.
Someday we’ll be telling stories round the campfire about what life was like when support for Israel was bipartisan. Republican and Democratic congressmen reliably voted for aid to the Jewish state. The majority of Republican and Democratic officials defended Israel in the public square. Republican and Democratic candidates reassured voters that they had Israel’s back. “Israel’s security is sacrosanct,” Barack Obama told the 2008 AIPAC policy conference. “Israel’s security is nonnegotiable,” Hillary Clinton told the same audience eight years later.

Pleasant memories. When AIPAC gathered in Washington in March, none of the major Democratic candidates then running for president bothered to attend. Joe Biden, Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders, and Pete Buttigieg appeared instead at the October meeting of J Street, the left-wing alternative to AIPAC founded in 2007. The message Biden delivered over video was commonplace. The others were not.

“What is going on in Gaza right now is absolutely inhumane, it is unacceptable, it is unsustainable,” Sanders growled. In a Sanders administration, he went on, aid to Israel would depend on the status of the Hamas-controlled territory. When he ran for president four years ago, Sanders was fringe. Now he’s the pacesetter.

“We must find ways to make tangible progress on the ground toward a two-state solution,” Warren said. How? Well, a week earlier, Warren had said, “All options are on the table.”

Israel is one issue on which Warren and Buttigieg agree. “We have a responsibility as the key ally to Israel to make sure that we guide things in the right direction,” Mayor Pete said. For Buttigieg and Warren, the way to “guide things” is to cut aid that flows to settlements or to an Israeli government that annexes territory in the West Bank.

Three of the four highest-polling Democratic presidential candidates are talking about Israel in language other politicians reserve for rogue states. It’s the latest and most worrisome sign that a growing number of Democrats place a higher value on pandering to progressives than on Israeli sovereignty and security. The aggressive rhetoric is another reminder of the energy on the political left. Bernie Sanders’s political revolution may be in trouble, but his foreign-policy revolution in how the Democratic Party sees Israel is going swimmingly.

Bernie is capitalizing on long-running trends. In his recent book *We Stand Divided*, Daniel Gordis notes...
that relations between Israel and the American Diaspora have often been fraught: “For most of the time since Theodor Herzl launched political Zionism at the First Zionist Congress in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897, the relationship between American Jews and Herzl's idea, and then the country it created, has been complex at best and often even openly antagonistic.”

What many assumed was a durable pro-Israel consensus was in fact a consequence of specific historical circumstances. The American left’s goodwill toward Israel was based in large part on images: Israel the scrappy underdog, Israel the land of social democracy and the kibbutzim, Israel the participant in Camp David and the Oslo Accords. The picture today is different.

For the left, the state created in the aftermath of the Holocaust and invaded by Arab armies has become a conquering power. The nation of communes has become the nation of start-ups. The governments of David Ben-Gurion and Yitzhak Rabin have become the governments of Ariel Sharon and Benjamin Netanyahu.

Americans who belong to the millennial generation or to Generation Z have no memory of the Middle East “peace process.” Nor can they recall the second intifada or the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Many American Jews express their identity not through religious practice and Zionism but through social-justice activism and tikkun olam. To them, Israel is an oppressive state with un-egalitarian religious and political systems. In a 2007 study, fewer than half of American Jews age 35 or younger said, “Israel’s destruction would be a personal tragedy.”

The following year, Barack Obama won two-thirds of the millennial vote and 78 percent of the Jewish vote. While he was sure to pay obeisance to the imperatives of Israeli security, Obama’s actions as president created the space for anti-Israel and anti-Zionist activism within the Democratic Party. “When there is no daylight [between Israel and the United States], Israel just sits on the sidelines, and that erodes our credibility with the Arabs,” he said in 2009.

Aided by J Street, Obama opened the shutters and blinds and flooded the U.S.-Israel relationship with daylight. His demand that Israel freeze settlement construction gave the Palestinians the opportunity to refuse talks. His decision not to punish Bashar Assad for gassing Syrians damaged American credibility and regional stability. His nuclear agreement with Iran not only endangered Israel but also divided and demoralized the pro-Israel community. In his final month in office, Obama broke 35 years of precedent and declined to veto a UN resolution condemning Israeli settlements.

Ironically—and predictably—these actions failed to build up credibility with Arab governments terrified by Obama’s attempted rapprochement with Iran. What Obama did do was prepare the ground for politicians and activists hostile to the Jewish state and Jews. When party leaders reinstated mentions of God and of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in the 2012 Democratic Party platform, some of the convention-goers booed. When Benjamin Netanyahu in 2015 criticized the Obama administration’s negotiations with Iran before a joint session of Congress, 56 Democratic legislators didn’t show up. Earlier this year, when the Senate took up a pro-Israel bill that included anti–Boycott Divest Sanction language, 22 Democrats voted against it.

Obama’s second term in office saw an explosion in far-left activity that manifested itself on campus and in Black Lives Matter, intersectional theory, and the Sanders movement. The same young people drive the anti-Semitic BDS Movement and join groups such as Students for Justice in Palestine and If Not Now. They campaign for Sanders and for his friends Ilhan Omar, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Rashida Tlaib. They find insignificant, if they acknowledge at all, the threats to Israel and to Israelis from Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian terrorism. A few quietly hope for the success of Israel’s enemies. In their view of the world, Palestinians and other members of victimized classes have no agency and therefore no responsibility.

In 2019, If Not Now published something called “Five Ways the American Jewish Establishment Supports the Occupation.” Gordis writes:

Though the lengthy document assailed Israel’s violation of Palestinian rights and the American Jewish establishment’s ostensible support of those violations, the report was no less noteworthy for the fact that nowhere did it mention Palestinian violence against Israel, the continued pledge of many Palestinians (including the Hamas government of Gaza) to destroy Israel, any mention of the Jewish right to sovereignty, or even the word “Zionism.”

J Street and If Not Now represent neither the whole Democratic Party nor the entire American Jewish community. But numbers matter less than influence. Progressives are becoming more anti-Israel as the Democratic Party experiences generational and cultural change. It is revealing that Sanders denounced Israel at the J Street conference while two former members of Obama’s administration looked on approvingly. Among the few remaining legacies of Barack Obama is his transformation of the Democrats from a pro-Israel party into an anti-Israel one. ❯
IN THE 19th century, a poetic debate took place about theology and history. The contestants were two literary geniuses: the man who was then the most famous poet in America, and perhaps the most famous female poet in Jewish history. The tale, even for those uninterested in verse, contains deep lessons about the Jewish past in the United States—and its future.

In 1852, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow arrived in Newport, Rhode Island, and visited the Touro synagogue, the oldest Jewish edifice in America, built by Sephardic Jews before the Revolution. In 1790, George Washington had toured the town and corresponded with Moses Seixas, leader of the Jewish community. Seixas famously described the newly established government as one that "gives to bigotry no sanction," and Washington responded by adopting the very same phrase, forever associating Newport’s Jews with religious liberty.

Yet at the time, Judaism in Newport was dying. Seixas’s letters reveal that he was desperately struggling to maintain traditional services; he lacked anyone remotely qualified to read from the Torah, and the one shofar for the High Holidays was badly damaged. It was only two decades after Washington’s famous visit that the remaining Jews of Newport left for New York. Longfellow thus found the synagogue locked and empty.

Longfellow strolled to the Jewish cemetery and was taken with what he saw. Two years later, he published “The Jewish Cemetery in Newport.” Given Longfellow’s fame, his poem would have been read by his devotees across the country. The first stanza establishes contrasts between the liveliness of Newport and the dead Jews lying buried before him: “How strange it seems! These Hebrews in their graves, / Close by the street of this fair seaport town, / Silent beside the never-silent waves, / rest in all this moving up and down!”

Following the tradition of their ancestors, the Jews of Newport laid some of the gravestones horizontally. The stone tablets on the ground, with Hebrew letters etched upon them, reminded Longfellow of the shattering of the covenant at the sin of the Golden Calf: “And these sepulchral stones, so old and brown, / That pave with level flags their burial-place, / Seem like the tablets of the Law, thrown down / And broken by Moses at the mountain’s base.”

Throughout the poem, Longfellow expresses sympathy for the Jews who suffered:

Pride and humiliation hand in hand
Walked with them through the world where’er they went;
Trampled and beaten were they as the sand,
And yet unshaken as the continent.
To Longfellow, the beautiful abandoned building bespoke the fossilized form of the Jewish people: “Closed are the portals of their Synagogue, / No Psalms of David now the silence break, No Rabbi reads the ancient Decalogue / In the grand dialect the Prophets spake.” He concluded with a eulogy for the people of Israel:

But ah! what once has been shall be no more!
The groaning earth in travail and in pain
Brings forth its races, but does not restore,
And the dead nations never rise again.

Fifteen years later, a young Jewish woman by the name of Emma Lazarus came on vacation to Newport. She had been raised in wealth and privilege; her family, still religiously affiliated, was not rigorously observant. Longfellow’s description of her people’s demise was well known to her. For Lazarus, this was personal. She was a descendant of the Seixas family. It was the Judaism of her predecessors that Longfellow had seemed to be dead.

Something—national indignation, family pride, or profound religious insight—welled up within her, and the teenager drafted a poem in response. Mimicking Longfellow’s meter, she chose a title that reflected a difference of emphasis: “In the Jewish Synagogue at Newport.” For Lazarus, it was the sanctuary where her predecessors had prayed that was the truly inspiring site more than their burial ground. The poem focuses on the lives they lived, rather than on their deaths.

Lazarus gives tribute to the radiance of freedom her forefathers had found in America, but she reflects on how the synagogue transported a visitor from the present to the roots of the Jewish people: “How as we gaze, in this new world of light, / Upon this relic of the days of old, / The present vanishes, and tropic bloom / And Eastern towns and temples we behold.” No one had read from the Torah in that synagogue in decades, yet standing there, in communion with her predecessors, Lazarus felt herself travel back in time back to Sinai itself: “A wondrous light upon a sky-kissed mount, / A man who reads Jehovah's written law, / 'Midst blinding glory and effulgence rare, / Unto a people prone with reverent awe.”

Lazarus admits to a cruel irony; in the sanctuary, “The light of the ‘perpetual lamp’ is spent / That an undying radiance was to shed.” (All synagogues feature an eternal flame meant to symbolize the divine presence.) Yet she insists that even as the light in the synagogue may have ceased to be lit, the Jewish flame endures. Her conclusion is a direct response to Longfellow:

But ah! what once has been shall be no more!
The groaning earth in travail and in pain
Brings forth its races, but does not restore,
And the dead nations never rise again.

Whereas Longfellow thought of the Jewish covenantal tablets shattered at Sinai, Lazarus invokes the burning bush where Moses first met the Divine at Sinai. As David Gelernter once wrote in these pages, the miracle is “not the burning but the continued burning. Those dry thorns should have burned to black dust in an instant. But time has been stretched out, stretched thin, and a moment of instantaneous combustion lasts on and on.” The Jews endure, and the fire of Sinai could still be sensed in that empty sanctuary.

This past month, I travelled with members of my congregation, New York’s Shearith Israel, to which Lazarus had belonged, to spend Shabbat at Touro synagogue in Newport. It was intensely moving to pray the same Sephardic liturgy that Seixas would have used, and to sing the tunes he would have sung. We then visited the cemetery, read both poems, and recited Kaddish, feeling intensely how the Jewish people, often deemed dead, have indeed risen again and again. At that moment, the promise of America, embodied by Washington’s visit to Newport, suddenly merged with the loyalty that Moses Seixas showed for his own faith and people.

Lazarus went on to lead a life of Jewish activism. Today she is known first and foremost for her celebration not of the burning bush, but of a different source of illumination, that of the Statue of Liberty: “I lift my lamp beside the golden door.” For many American Jews, Lazarus’s ode to America is rightly associated with our ancestors’ immigration and the blessings of freedom. At the same time, the Jewish arrival in America was to a great extent followed by abandonment of Jewish identity. Many American Jews might readily identify with the legacy of liberty associated with Newport, but less so with Seixas’s struggle to keep Judaism alive.

Rather than assimilation, our responsibility as Jews is to combine the lamp of America with the fire of Judaism. The shofar that Moses Seixas sought to sound was utilized in a relevant metaphor by Cynthia Ozick: “If we blow into the narrow end of the shofar, we will be heard far. But if we choose to be Mankind rather than Jewish and blow into the wide part, we will not be heard at all; for us, America will have been in vain.” It falls to us, in this “new world of light,” to be inspired by Lazarus’s Newport poem, to make the case for the eternal fire of Jewish identity, and to summon the loyalty to live by its luminance.
THE UNITED STATES is entangled in foreign intrigue to an extent not seen since the Cold War. This might seem like an odd development for a country whose two leading political parties have taken a turn toward isolationism. But the foreign entanglements that currently consume our national discussions are utterly unlike those seen during our global conflict with the Soviet Union. The espionage of the Cold War era has been replaced by a series of scandals or controversies—some political, some commercial—in which American politicians and businesses entities have been exposed engaging in craven behavior involving parties abroad.
Foremost among our front-page political scandals is President Donald Trump’s odd stance toward the government of Ukraine. The case for impeaching the president rests on his allegedly having halted military aid to our Eastern European ally to coerce Kiev into investigating his political rival, former vice president Joe Biden. Biden, for his part, is contending with his own related political scandal. He has found himself under increased scrutiny for his son Hunter’s role on the boards of both a Ukrainian energy company and a Chinese banking firm during the elder Biden’s term as vice president.

Moving away from the strictly political, there is a different and far less critical controversy involving the National Basketball Association and the government of China. That sorry tale began on October 4, when Houston Rockets general manager Daryl Morey tweeted out his support for the pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong who had organized in opposition to Chinese authoritarianism. Soon after Morey’s tweet, the NBA’s official Chinese broadcast partner, a company called Tencent, announced it would suspend all business with the Rockets. There followed Chinese boycott campaigns and endorsement retractions aimed at punishing the team. It turns out that China, according to the New York Times, is the NBA’s “second-most important market” after the United States. And the Chinese response to Morey’s tweet could cost the Rockets as much as $25 million in sponsorships and other revenue.

Morey deleted the offending tweet while many in the league offered apologies of one sort or another. This included a tweet from Rockets owner Tilman Fertitta, saying that “@dmorey does NOT speak for the @Houston Rockets.” Heaven forbid that a successful American enterprise be associated with the words “fight for freedom.”

A common thread connects our president’s dangling aid before an Eastern European leader in return for political favors, a vice president’s son who gets paid by Ukrainian and Chinese firms, and the NBA’s moral collapse before Beijing. That thread is part of a great unraveling—the loosening and fraying of our national purpose and resolve following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the wake of the Berlin Wall’s destruction, Americans sought to ramp up economic and political engagement with post-Soviet countries and China. Our reasons were both noble and self-interested—we could gain access to new markets and, by doing so, help to make these countries freer. The noble goal of expanding freedom made our self-interest all the more palatable.

But while this engagement has yielded some good, that’s not all it did. We barely noticed that the process meant the United States was growing more intertwined with kleptocracies. And in time, almost without realizing it, we ourselves would fall prey to some of the kleptocratic temptations and moral compromises that characterize such regimes.

We did make some countries better places. But, in the process, our own politics became a little more like theirs.

For many observers, the defeat of Communism in the Soviet Union and economic reforms in China spelled the beginning of a final global victory for Western liberalism. The most famous expositor of this idea was Francis Fukuyama, who argued in his National Interest essay “The End of History?” in 1989 (and later in book form): “What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”

Fukuyama never said that struggles would cease between nations. Rather, he asserted that in the realm of “consciousness,” Western liberal democracy had proved itself more enduring than its chief ideological competitors in the 20th century, fascism and Communism. We won. They lost.

For the United States, the main questions of foreign policy would no longer center on containing or defeating Communism but would rather be about how best to facilitate the large-scale shift toward liberty that was already under way. The answers revolved around directing economic aid and venture capital to the evolving markets in China and the former Soviet Union. Chinese market reforms and the reborn Russia provided openings for the U.S. to invest, literally, in the future freedom of these countries.

To do business with China or the former Soviet Union was to promote what President Bill Clinton called “market democracy.” One version or another of the libertarian notion that free markets create free people found purchase across the political spectrum. In a 1992 New York Times op-ed headlined “Help Russia. Help Ourselves,” the influential Democratic Representative Dick Gephardt wrote, “The U.S. must promote commercial ties with the Commonwealth of Independent States—an effort that will produce jobs and rising living standards in all nations. That means providing preferential trade status, using our oil in-
industry to develop commonwealth energy resources, exporting computers and telecommunications products and aiding U.S. business investment in Russia and the other republics. Every day of delay endangers democratization and market development as well as costing American jobs and profits that will otherwise end up in Japan or Europe.” He ended his piece thus: “If we summon the idealism that enabled the Marshall Plan to succeed in the 1940’s, it would mean American jobs and greater security in the 1990’s, an outcome that sounds like ‘America first’ to me.”

A similar argument, pertaining to China, was stated plainly in 1999 by Henry S. Rowen of the conservative Hoover Institution: “Without exception, rich countries are democracies (more or less) and stay that way. Some poor countries are also democracies, but most are not. And few of the poor democracies stay democratic over time. Although the progression isn’t always smooth, the historical pattern is clear: As countries get richer, they become more democratic. The Asian nations are no exception.”

It’s been a long sad fall from that hopeful idea to our implicitly accepting Beijing’s authoritarian domination of Hong Kong as the price of doing business with China. But it’s not as if there were no warning signs. In fact, the U.S. began to lose its way almost as soon as it set out to write a new chapter in the history of global freedom. Bill Clinton was America’s first post–Cold War president, and we can trace many of our recent woes back to decisions made during his two terms in office.

American Government and industry were supposed to make aid and business opportunities in China and the former Soviet Union contingent on further reforms and improvements in the countries that sought our help. That way, international engagement would improve the quality of life for those living in these countries while serving American national-security interests. This meant deeper involvement in the political affairs of slippery regimes. But those regimes proved uncommonly adept at hiding their transgressions—and once money started flowing back to the U.S., American businesses and administrations became uncommonly adept at looking the other way.

Bit by bit, instead of these foreign governments raising their standards, we lowered ours. This started long before Daryl Morey was headline news and before Twitter was even conceivable. When it comes to ignoring Chinese troublemaking, the Clinton administration has much to answer for. A few examples stand out.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, weapons proliferation was a chief national-security concern for the United States. Yet our enthusiastic policy of engagement soon found us making dangerous compromises. In 1992, China signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. But two years later, the press began reporting that the Chinese National Nuclear Corporation was at work on a secret and proscribed nuclear reactor in Pakistan, selling Islamabad technology to make bomb-grade uranium, and had been contracted to build uranium plants for Iran. The Clinton administration grumbled and briefly halted $800 million in loans to the American companies Bechtel and Westinghouse, which were working on a reactor for the Chinese corporation. But after assurances from the Chinese government, the U.S. approved the loans and granted visas for engineers from the firm.

Then, in 1995, the Clinton administration struck a $500-million-plus deal with the Chinese Great Wall Industry Corp., a firm owned by the Chinese military, that guaranteed it bidding rights to work on the launch of U.S. satellites. This not only encouraged further Chinese proliferation; it gave China access to the technology that it would soon use to point missiles at Taiwan.

As for human rights in China, American contradictions were also visible from the outset. In 1992, President Bill Clinton signed an executive order requiring that China ease up on its domestic repression if it wanted to continue enjoying its most-favored-nation trade status in the United States. But within a year, he went ahead and granted the Chinese most-favored-nation status while acknowledging that Beijing hadn’t met the demands he had made.

In 1998, not even a decade after the Tiananmen Square massacre, the Clinton administration vowed not to criticize China at a UN human-rights meeting in Geneva. When Chinese dissident Wei Jingsheng came to visit the U.S. that same year to speak about human-rights abuses in China, he evinced a keen understanding of American indifference. “I wouldn’t call the American attitude towards China abnormal,” he said. “Once a country achieves democracy and material wealth, it often finds it difficult to understand the problems of other societies. That is why we in China relied on ourselves to build democracy, rather than calling on the West for support.”

Things have remained more or less the same up to the present. Some American companies have struggled to find the right balance between doing business and doing good. The most emblematic example of American industry’s thorny position in regard to Chi-
Chinese human-rights abuses comes from Google, whose founding motto—"Don't be evil"—has since been abandoned. The Silicon Valley behemoth dove head-first into the Chinese market and soon came up against the jarring reality of government repression. Chinese Google users were perpetually hacked and surveilled from inside China. Additionally, China regularly censored its Internet and blocked popular websites such as Facebook. At first, Google played along, censoring its own search results to satisfy Beijing. But in 2010, the company decided it could no longer be a party to these abuses and shut down its search site in China. It didn't, however, pull its research-and-development teams from working there. In August 2018, news outlets reported that Google was at work on a new censored search engine called Dragonfly to be used in China. But four months later, the company abandoned the project after internal debates about the ethics of once again submitting to Chinese censorship. Like the U.S. more broadly, Google sought to do no evil in its business dealings with China and found it impossible. What it will do next is unknown, but it's clear from the company's persistent efforts that it will be itching to get back—somehow—into the lucrative Chinese search-engine market.

Other Silicon Valley companies, for all their professed idealism and messianic moralizing, seem entirely at ease with the reality of Chinese oppression. LinkedIn does big business in China by catering to censors' whims. Apple doesn't offer a Taiwan-flag emoji to users in mainland China lest the company upset the Chinese government, which doesn't recognize Taiwanese independence. To make matters worse, as protesters marched for freedom in Hong Kong, the company decided to pull the Taiwanese flag from user keyboards there as well. During the same period, Paypal announced that it would enter the Chinese marketplace.

China is certainly less authoritarian than it was in 1989, but it is far more oppressive than most Americans care to admit. And Fukuyama was entirely too sanguine when he wrote in his seminal essay that "Chinese competitiveness and expansionism on the world scene have virtually disappeared." In this century, China has been a consistent and dangerous bully in the South China Seas, a fierce competitor among great nations for power and profit across the globe, and the world's number-one source of intellectual-property theft. Most important, the Chinese Communist Party has had no problem adapting its modes of oppression and aggression to fit the free market. And we've grown accustomed to it. The mixed motive behind our post–Cold War engagement with China—profit and democracy promotion—has become decidedly less mixed.

THE COUNTRIES OF THE FORMER SOVIET UNION ARE VERY DIFFERENT FROM ONE ANOTHER, BUT CORRUPTION IS A MAINSTAY OF THEM ALL.
their earnings outside of the country. It was in the 1990s that the term “oligarch” first came into popular usage.

Vice President Al Gore played a large and important role in defining Russian deviancy down while encouraging American investment in the former Soviet Union. Beginning in 1993, Gore, along with Russia’s then prime minister, Victor Chernomyrdin, co-chaired the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission, which handled a good deal of U.S.-Russia trade and energy negotiations. Before becoming prime minister, Chernomyrdin was head of Gazprom, Russia’s mostly state-owned gas company. This put him in the orbit of the oligarchs, as Robert Bartley went on to note in the Wall Street Journal: “twice-yearly photo-ops with Mr. Gore and Mr. Chernomyrdin served to identify the ‘oligarchs’ with the U.S. and with capitalist reform.”

Optics were the least of it. For years, Russian officials failed to institute the kind of market reforms that the Clinton administration was hoping for, and for years, Washington turned its head. Unnamed C.I.A. officials told the New York Times that, in 1995, they gave Gore a dossier on Chernomyrdin and corruption only to have it returned with a “barnyard epithet” written on it. Corroborating accounts say the word was “bullshit,” written in Gore’s hand. In 1997, less than a year before Russia’s massive financial crisis, Gore predicted a “surge of investment” in the Russian market.

And that was all before the emergence of Vladimir Putin. Putin, the revanchist Russian strongman, in his effort to reclaim the countries in Russia’s “near abroad,” has “weaponized kleptocracy,” in the words of the Hudson Institute’s Marius Laurinavičius. As Joe Biden himself put it in 2015, “the Kremlin is working hard to buy off and co-opt European political forces, funding both right-wing and left-wing anti-systemic parties throughout Europe.”

Has Putin aimed his kleptocracy gun at the United States? Yes. And how has the U.S. responded? In certain key instances, very poorly. This is most evident in the tangle of suspicious or downright dirty deals closely associated with figures connected to Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign and involved in the early days of his administration. This includes, most notably, the case of Paul Manafort.

A seasoned Republican political operative, Manafort is the American poster boy for cashing in on post-Soviet lucre. Prior to joining the Trump campaign, Manafort made millions of dollars advising Victor Yanukovych, who served as Ukraine’s president from 2010 to 2014. Yanukovych, a consummate political thug, attempted to steal an election and likely poisoned one political opponent. He was also staunchly pro-Russia and a devoted ally of Vladimir Putin’s. After Yanukovych was ousted from office, Manafort worked to rehabilitate the kleptocrat’s image both in Eastern Europe and the West. During this period, according to documents found in Kiev, Yanukovych’s Party of Regions paid Manafort some $12.7 million dollars in cash.

In 2017, Manafort was indicted on multiple charges connected to his time working for Yanukovych and his laundering of the vast off-the-books sums he received. In March 2019, he was sentenced to 47 months in prison. He pled guilty to, among other things, two charges of conspiracy to defraud the United States.

What is perhaps more concerning than Manafort’s overt crime is the effect that his pro-Yanukovych/pro-Russia work has had on American politics. Documents newly released by the FBI show that it was Manafort who pushed the idea that Russia’s 2016 hacking of the Democratic National Committee email servers was actually a Ukrainian operation. When Trump moved to withhold U.S. military aid to Ukraine, lest we forget, the president made it clear to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that he wanted Ukraine to look into this very conspiracy theory. If there was, in fact, a quid pro quo under way, this constituted half of the quid.

Another prominent Trump figure who advanced the theory that Ukraine was responsible for the DNC hack, according to the FBI, was Michael Flynn, who
has his own unfortunate monetary connection to Vladimir Putin. Flynn, a retired Army lieutenant general who had been head of the Defense Intelligence Agency under Barack Obama, served briefly as Trump’s first national-security adviser. In 2015, Flynn sat next to Vladimir Putin at a gala dinner in Moscow in honor of Russia’s state-owned RT television network. At the event, Flynn gave a speech for which he was paid $45,000. He resigned as national-security adviser in February 2017 amid reports that he’d misled the FBI about his communication with Russian ambassador to the United States, Sergey Kislyak. In December of that year, as part of a plea agreement, he pleaded guilty to “willfully and knowingly” making “false, fictitious, and fraudulent statements” to the FBI.

Mike Flynn is no Russian operative. And I think far too much has been made of his case. But a generation ago, someone in his position would never have taken a cent to appear alongside the Russian strongman in Moscow. It would have been, and still should be, an assault on his own dignity. But influential Americans have become so routinized in such dealings that they hardly trouble our consciences at all.

Similarly, someone in Joe Biden’s position, in an earlier age, would have known that his son’s getting $50,000 a month to serve on the board of a Ukrainian energy firm was, at least, unseemly. The same goes for Hunter Biden’s time on the board of BHR Equity Investment Fund Management Co., whose largest shareholder is the state-controlled Bank of China.

None of this is to say that, on balance, the American urge, after the Cold War, to nurture freedom and good governance abroad was wrong. In fact, it’s hard to imagine a better alternative. We can’t know what China or former Soviet states would look like today had we taken a more reticent approach to their economic and political development. The persistence of Chinese aggression and censorship and post-Soviet corruption indicates, however, that no magical hands-free transformation was ever in the offing.

As with all policies, the American push for market democracy had unintended consequences—consequences that aim right at the heart of our sense of the United States as a freedom-loving nation of laws. This is not to say that the U.S. is “just like everybody else” now. Paul Manafort is in jail for his crimes, and Joe Biden has to reckon with his son’s cashing in. But we’ve picked up a few bad habits from those we’d hoped to help, and those habits have taken a toll, not least psychologically, on the nation.

It is often said that democracy and good governance can’t be exported just anywhere, that they’re too fragile and require special conditions to survive. But there’s a corollary to this: Corruption and the abuse of power are not easily contained. They’ll find purchase where they can. The result is this strange epilogue to the “end of history.” There’s still no worthy ideological rival to Western liberalism, but we’ve managed to make the victory feel far less glorious than it once did.8

Commentary
The Forgotten Proto-Zionist

The visionary life of Warder Cresson

By Michael Medved

Israel’s contemporary critics angrily insist that the special relationship between America and the Jewish state stems solely from the outsize electoral and economic clout of American Jews. But those who argue that this undue influence has always shaped our policies in the Middle East ignore the fact that the commitment to a rebuilt Jerusalem and a reborn Israel began at a time when the republic’s Jewish community played an insignificant role in national life, with a minimal population amounting to far less than 1 percent of the federal total. In fact, the idea that the United States ought to link its fate to a Jewish state officially originated in 1844 with the very first diplomat America ever dispatched to Jerusalem, more than a century before Israel’s Declaration of Independence.

His name was Warder Cresson, and he led an extraordinary and singular American life.

Cresson’s own Huguenot forebears first came to the New World from Holland in 1657, settling in Delaware and New York. After some adventures in the West Indies, his grandfather Solomon found his way to Philadelphia, where he became an ardent member of the Society of Friends and part of the new city’s Quaker establishment. As successful artisans and entrepreneurs, the Cressons owned prime real estate on Chestnut Street in the center of town as well as valuable agricultural properties in the surrounding countryside.

Born in 1798, Cresson began working the family farms in nearby Darby and Chester counties at age 17, impressing relatives and neighbors with his business and leadership abilities. Married at 23 to another devout Quaker, he proceeded to raise six children of his own and to follow the clan’s pattern of judicious investment and accumulation of wealth.

As he approached 30, however, religious doubts began to torment him, and he published outspokenly radical religious tracts (including Babylon the Great Is
Cresson reached the conclusion that God himself had created the United States for one purpose above all others: rescuing the Jews of the world from exile and oppression.

Falling! that questioned his Quaker faith, challenging its perceived emphasis on “an outward form, order of discipline” without proper attention to the “inward man.” Cresson formally rejected the Society of Friends and affiliated himself with a series of unconventional sects that had arisen during America’s second “Great Awakening,” including, in turn, the Shakers, the Mormons, the Seventh-day Adventists, and the “Campbellites,” who believed in restoring the united, purified Christianity of the apostles.

In the process, Cresson developed a local reputation for sharing his insights and inspirations by “haranguing in the streets” of Philadelphia. With his flowing black beard and burning blue eyes, he cut a formidable, unforgettable figure, frightening unsuspecting passersby with stentorian warnings about God’s wrath and the imminent apocalypse.

Inevitably, this agitated religious seeker found his way to Mikveh Israel, the city’s leading Jewish congregation, where he received an unexpectedly warm reception from the ardent abolitionist and influential scholar Isaac Leeser. As the synagogue’s leader, Leeser patiently engaged Cresson in wide-ranging discussions on biblical interpretation and messianic redemption while introducing him to the work of Mordecai Manuel Noah, a Jewish political operative and man of letters who had begun pushing for an American commitment to reestablish a Jewish homeland in the Middle East.

Cresson became instantly captivated by that idea and reached the conclusion that “there is no salvation for the Gentiles but by coming to Israel.” He also reached the conclusion that God himself had created the United States for one purpose above all others: rescuing the Jews of the world from exile and oppression. He discerned profound significance in the young republic’s national symbol, since the prophet Isaiah had promised for the weary and fainthearted that “the Lord will renew their strength; they will soar on wings like eagles.” He felt sure that the prophecy of a reborn Israel would be fulfilled by the soaring power of the American eagle that would “overshadow the land with his wings.”

To assure his own role in these miraculous forthcoming events, he contacted a friendly Philadelphia congressman named E. Joy Morris to arrange his appointment as America’s first consul to Jerusalem. At the time, the Holy City that loomed so large in religious imagery had degenerated into a run-down, isolated village of barely 15,000 souls (half of them Jewish) that hardly merited its own consulate by any conventional calculation. But Representative Morris wrote to Secretary of State John C. Calhoun that the American pilgrims and missionaries who visited Jerusalem in increasing numbers could benefit from a diplomatic outpost in that remote corner of the Ottoman Empire. More important, he made it clear that Warder Cresson, relying on his personal wealth, had volunteered to work for the government without compensation.

This was an offer that the perennially cash-strapped State Department could hardly refuse, so the official appointment came through on May 17, 1844. Cresson set out immediately, ready to make a decisive break with his past. He wrote in his diary at the time of his departure: “In the Spring of 1844 I left everything near and dear to me on earth. I left the wife of my youth and six lovely children (dearer to me than my natural life), and an excellent farm, with everything comfortable around me. I left all these in the pursuit of truth, and for the sake of Truth alone.”

Almost immediately, protests arose over the suitability of the selection of this relentless truth-seeker for a new diplomatic post. Samuel D. Ingham, of New Hope, Pennsylvania, who had been treasury secretary under President Andrew Jackson, wrote to Calhoun: “The papers have recently announced the appointment of Warder Cresson, Consul to Jerusalem. This man…has been laboring under an aberration of mind for many years; his mania is of the religious species. He was born a Quaker, wanted to be a preacher…and has gone round the compass from one job to another, sometimes preaching about the church doors and in the streets; his passion is for religious controversy…but, in truth, he is withal a very weak-minded man and his mind, what there is of it, quite out of order…. His appointment is made a theme of ridicule by all who know him.”

Calhoun responded to this alarming dispatch by writing to Cresson and announcing, in President John Tyler’s name, that the government would not sponsor the establishment of a Jerusalem consulate after all. By
that time, the idealistic emissary had already departed for the Holy Land, where he disembarked melodramatically from a British ship at the port of Jaffa, stepping ashore with an American flag in one hand and a caged dove of peace in the other.

Quickly establishing himself as the official representative of the United States, he created a new consular seal and issued a sweeping proclamation to all the Jews of the Holy City to assure them that they would henceforth enjoy the firm protection of the American government. But before Cresson could do much to give meaning to that promise, word finally reached him that his appointment had been canceled at the highest levels in Washington.

For Cresson, this news constituted only a minor inconvenience: He enjoyed the title of consul far too much to give it up and continued to present himself as the envoy of the American Republic, however dubious his claims. The bemused Turkish authorities mostly shrugged at his pretensions, while no other American officials bothered to travel to the remote region to raise uncomfortable questions about his status.

Meanwhile, Cresson took great satisfaction in hosting visiting dignitaries and startling them with his increasingly elaborate and grandiose plans for reconfiguring the Middle East and, ultimately, the rest of the globe. He welcomed the British novelist William Makepeace Thackeray and informed him that the United States would work closely with the United Kingdom to enlist the other powers of Europe in establishing a promising, prosperous new homeland for the Jewish people.

The author of *Vanity Fair* remained singularly unimpressed by this preposterous scheme. “He has no other knowledge of Syria but what he derives from prophecy,” reported Thackeray. “I doubt whether any government has received or appointed so queer an ambassador.” As if the conversational initiatives didn’t count as queer enough, there were also his increasing-ly ebullient writings. Shortly after his arrival, Cresson hastily penned a glowing paean to his new hometown, describing in rapturous terms the ancient but squalid village that most other visitors viewed as dirty and decrepit. *Jerusalem, the Centre and Joy of the Whole Earth*, published in Philadelphia and London at Cresson’s direction, failed to inspire a measurable upsurge in either emigrants or tourists but did draw enough attention so that he followed it with other book-length pamphlets combining reportage with religious argument.

Those arguments began drawing the peripatetic would-be consul far from his Christian roots, especially as he became personally engaged with the leading Sephardic rabbis in Jerusalem. At age 49, after seven years of study and contemplation, after intoxicating exploration of the shrines and byways of the God-haunted Judean hills and the shores of the tranquil Sea of Galilee, Warder Cresson reached the most consequential decision of a turbulent life.

“I remained in Jerusalem in my former faith until the 28th day of March, 1848,” he wrote, “when I became fully satisfied that I never could obtain Strength and Rest, but by doing as Ruth did, and saying to her Mother-in-Law, or Naomi (The Jewish Church), ‘Entreat me not to leave thee … for whither thou goest I will go. In short … I was circumcised, entered the Holy Covenant and became a Jew.”

During the course of this transition, he had been writing to his wife and children to keep them informed of his spiritual progress—and of his new name, Michael Boaz Israel ben Avraham. He had no desire to abandon the family that he “loved most dearly above anything else on earth” and felt certain that he could persuade them to share the satisfactions of his new faith and to return with him to his mystical mission in Zion.

Sailing back to Philadelphia just two months after completing his conversion, the former consul received a devastating reception from his nearest and dearest. His wife, Elizabeth, had taken sole possession of their property, selling off the family farm as well as Warder’s personal effects. She ignored his appeals for a settlement and joined other family members in lodging a formal charge of “lunacy” against him. A “sheriff’s jury” of six men quickly agreed with their arguments and issued its verdict of insanity, but Cresson, who never spent a day in an asylum, challenged their decision in court.

The resulting trial lasted for almost three years, included more than 100 witnesses, and became a national sensation. Aside from the obvious attempt
The leaders of the nation’s Jewish community testified on Cresson’s behalf, resisting the notion that conversion to Judaism in any way constituted evidence of insanity.

by a frustrated and embittered wife to seize what remained of her wandering husband's wealth, the dispute involved the government's power to stigmatize and punish a citizen's midlife decision to embrace an ancient faith. Cresson fiercely defended his right to select his own religious path, no matter how exotic or bizarre its practices might seem to his former neighbors.

Esteemed physicians, theologians, and legal scholars gave testimony on both sides. While no one denied Cresson's reputation as “a strange bird” (in the words of one reporter), the leaders of the nation's small Jewish community testified on his behalf, resisting the notion that conversion to Judaism in any way constituted automatic evidence of insanity. Cresson's lawyer, the eminent Horatio Hubbell Jr., characterized the case as a crucial test of the religious liberty guaranteed by the First Amendment. His impassioned closing statement ended with a dramatic denunciation of the attempt to discredit an unconventional thinker based on his religious ideas alone. “The only charge left with which to accuse my client,” he thundered, “is that he became a Jew.”

By that time, the newspapers covering the trial had swung to support of Cresson's cause, and they unanimously expressed their jubilation at his vindication. Philadelphia's Public Ledger saw the decision as “settling forever ... the principle that a man’s ‘religious opinions’ never can be made the test of his sanity.”

Having overturned the prior verdict of lunacy, the court enabled the newly minted Michael Boaz Israel ben Avraham to continue worshipping at Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel Congregation, where he enjoyed the status of local hero and meticulously followed Jewish religious law. He used his last months in the United States to pen a spiritual autobiography filled with exultant, sometimes terrifying prophecies, predicting the imminent rebirth of the Land of Israel and the ingathering of the exiles, despite unimaginable trials and terrors.

The cover for his publication showed a sketch of a human heart, consumed by flame, locked within the traditional six-pointed Star of David. The title proclaimed: THE SHIELD OF DAVID: HOLOCAUST TO THE UNITY OF GOD AND TO DAVID THE MESSIAH. The peculiar use of the term “holocaust,” more than 80 years before Hitler’s rise to power, offers one more example of Cresson's haunting insights and premonitions, which became increasingly inseparable from his overwhelming weirdness and uncompromising oddity.

Within a year of his trial’s successful conclusion, he divorced his wife and returned to Jerusalem in 1852 with a new mission: to restore the Land of Israel by restoring the land itself. He used his background as a “practical farmer” to argue that the establishment of scientifically sophisticated agricultural settlements could
He came to believe that by recreating a Jewish state to inspire the world, America could simultaneously save itself from approaching disunion over the issue of slavery.

remake the ancient earth of Judea at the same time that they reshaped the Jewish soul. Working the land, he averred, “is the one true foundation, the proper beginning and basis for all the other sciences and arts, the foundation for all of life’s needs and living conditions.”

His determination to plant model colonies amid the desolate landscape and to achieve national redemption through tireless farming not only anticipated future Zionist pioneers by nearly half a century but seemed distinctly, decisively American in its ambitious, against-the-odds vision. He raised money to purchase a substantial empty tract of land near Jaffa (today’s Tel Aviv) and another significant parcel known as Emek Refaim (Valley of the Healers) outside Jerusalem’s Old City—which is today an elegant, cosmopolitan neighborhood that’s home to numerous American immigrants to Israel, including my brother Jonathan.

In Cresson’s era, on the other hand, visiting Yankees saw a far less appealing prospect. In 1856, a frustrated 37-year-old writer, depressed by the disappointing response to his ambitious novel Moby Dick, borrowed money and made his way to the Middle East. Though he hoped for inspiration from the Holy Land’s sacred soil, Herman Melville saw only “the emptiness of the lifeless antiquity of Jerusalem” where “the migrant Jews are like flies that have taken up their abode in a skull.”

He sought out one of those tenacious flies: the famous former American, Warder Cresson, now remarried to a Sephardic Jewish woman and raising their two young children in a devoutly observant home. In lengthy arguments recorded in his journal, Melville contemptuously rejected the former consul’s soaring schemes of establishing cooperative farms to transform physical and spiritual realities. “The idea of making farmers of the Jews is vain,” he wrote. “In the first place, Judea is a desert, with few exceptions. In the second place, the Jews hate farming...and besides the number of Jews in Palestine is comparatively small. And how are the hosts of them scattered in other lands to be brought here? Only by a miracle.”

Cresson had long maintained that the United States alone could serve as the anointed instrument for that miracle. He also came to believe that by recreating a Jewish state to inspire the world, America could simultaneously save itself from approaching disunion over the tormenting issue of slavery. “God hath chosen Zion...as the centre and joy of the whole world,” he wrote, and “there cannot be unity and harmony... without this concentration.”

In 1860, on the verge of the American Civil War that Warder Cresson both dreaded and predicted, the always vigorous and outspoken Michael Boaz Israel ben Avraham took suddenly ill with an undiagnosed malady. After 12 days of ebbing strength, he passed on the Sabbath day at age 62. The newspapers of the time reported the burial of the onetime diplomat as a significant civic occasion, with all Jewish businesses in Jerusalem closed in his honor. A long line of mourners trudged up the steep slope of the Mount of Olives in the autumn season of the High Holy Days to grant him “such honors as are paid only to a prominent rabbi.” Unfortunately, neither of his two Jerusalem-born children—Avigail Ruth and David Ben-Zion—survived to adulthood, both dying within three years of their American father. Without descendants to tend to his gravesite, its location, like memories of the consul’s remarkable role, was lost to history for some five generations.

In 2013, however, renewed interest in the disputes and oddities of Warder Cresson’s turbulent life led to the rediscovery of his damaged but still-identifiable gravestone. It turned up among the relics in the crowded and ancient cemetery on the Mount of Olives, where it was suitably restored as a small memorial not long before his two homelands took the joint historic step of establishing the first American Embassy in Cresson’s holy capital of Jerusalem.

His contemporaries had dismissed him as a “strange bird,” but Warder Cresson anticipated the Zionist visions that later changed the world while advancing the idea that America’s destiny providentially connected her to a restored Israel. After his death, the miraculous events that unfolded in and around his Jerusalem home also established him as the posthumous but indisputable winner of his prophetic arguments with Herman Melville.
IN MARCH 1933, Herman J. Mankiewicz, a respected Hollywood screenwriter and producer, took a leave of absence from Metro Goldwyn Mayer to write a screenplay about Adolf Hitler. The former New York newspaperman, playwright, theater critic, and Algonquin Table habitué was known for his sophistication and irreverent wit. But Mankiewicz was also deeply political, and as he watched the Nazis tighten their stranglehold on Germany, he understood the implications and felt he had to act. Abandoning his usual ironic detachment, he wrote The Mad Dog of Europe in a desperate attempt to awaken the American public to the danger of Hitler’s rise to power. The story of his screenplay’s ultimately fruitless journey offers a portrait of American culture in the years leading up to World War II and the obstacles facing those who shared his prescience.

Set in “Transylvania,” The Mad Dog of Europe has two storylines. The first tracks the rise of housepainter “Adolf Mitler.” The second follows a pair of families, one Jewish and one Christian, who live in Gronau, Transylvania (Gronau was an actual German town). The screenplay opens with an “earnest and impressive” voice reciting: “This picture is produced in the interests of Democracy, an ideal which has inspired the noblest deeds of man. It has been the goal towards which nations have aspired—one after the other having asserted a determination to overthrow tyrants and erect a government ‘of the people, by the people, for the people.’ Today the greater part of the civilized world has reached this stage of enlightenment.”

Onscreen is: “THE INCIDENTS AND CHARACTERS IN THIS PICTURE ARE OF COURSE FICTIONAL. IT IS OBVIOUSLY ABSURD TO ASK ANYONE

Sydney Ladensohn Stern is a writer in New York City. This is adapted from her new book, The Brothers Mankiewicz: Hope, Heartbreak, and Hollywood Classics, just out from the University Press of Missouri.
TO BELIEVE THEY COULD HAPPEN IN THIS EN-LIGHTENED DAY AND AGE.”

To accompany the sarcastic disclaimer, Mankiewicz wanted the haunting melody of the Kol Nidre, the prayer associated with the holiest day of the Jewish year, “with the military phrases of DEUTSCHLAND ÜBER ALLES audible as an undertone.” Then, “a large swastika fills the screen, upon which the title is superimposed. The swastika gradually fades to the form of a cross with a figure crucified upon it.”

The first story opens in 1914 in the middle-class Gronau home of Professor Mendelssohn, his wife, their daughter, and three sons. When their oldest son, Karl, announces that he has enlisted to fight in the Great War, his father endorses his patriotism.

The second opens on a pair of housepainters, with the “dark little fellow” (Adolf Mitler) getting his colleague fired. A close-up of Mitler’s arm “sawing up and down with a paintbrush” dissolves into an arm “still going up and down without brush,” in a beer hall. Mitler’s first audible line is, “The French are a nation of niggers. We must exterminate them.”

Back in Gronau, little Ilsa Mendelssohn plays with Heinrich and Fritz Schmidt, whose father owns the local newspaper. Ilsa’s two older brothers die in the war, and Heinrich enlists. When the war ends, Heinrich returns, bitter and angry. Newsreel shots depict scenes of unemployment, and before Heinrich leaves Gronau to make a name for himself, he asks Ilsa to marry him when he returns. Ilsa agrees out of pity, though she actually loves his brother Fritz.

The two narratives merge when Heinrich becomes Mitler’s follower and watches him develop his political party. After a re-creation of the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch that sent Hitler to jail and inadvertently gave him the opportunity to write Mein Kampf, Heinrich accompanies Mitler to a country-club-like prison where Ilsa and Fritz visit him.

HEINRICH (parroting Mitler): No Jew can be a Transylvanian. They are enemies of Transylvania—parasites feeding on Transylvania’s blood.

ILSA (furiously): How dare you say that? My brothers died for Transylvania.

When this momentarily stops Heinrich, Mitler, who has been watching, tells him, “Don’t lower yourself by arguing with a Jew.” After they leave, Fritz tells Ilsa that Heinrich is like so many others who came back from the war, “beaten—hurt...they want to hurt someone else to get even.”

When Ilsa worries that they will get into power, Fritz laughs: “Here in Transylvania? How could they? They don’t even make sense. No thinking person would listen to them. They go around making speeches to each other and being put in jail.” They confess their feelings for each other, but Ilsa refuses to marry Fritz because being married to a Jew could make life difficult for him. Fritz prevails.

Real and fake newsreels and trick shots convey events from 1924 to 1929, including “shots of Nazi disturbances being quelled by police clubs...to show the illegitimacy of the movement.” And “famous Americans arriving in Transylvania ...i.e., Dempsey, W.R. Hearst, Charlie Chaplin, etc.”

To depict the 1929 “world crash,” Mankiewicz wanted newreel footage of panics and bank closings, followed by another trick shot: “Money being sucked back from Transylvania. Under the force of this suction several cracks appear in the surface. Across the bottom of the film the rats are swarming. As the cracks widen, they swarm up through them to the top, overrunning the whole surface.”

Then: impressionistic shots of Mitler addressing larger and larger groups of people. Following milestones such as the Reichstag fire and “Mitler’s” election, Herman wanted a public book-burning scene like those held all over Germany in May 1933, to showcase Erich Maria Remarque’s All Quiet on the Western Front—“a traitor to Transylvania—and still alive!” Albert Einstein’s Quantum Theory—“a Jew...and still alive!” Sigmund Freud, Heinrich Heine, Karl Marx, Upton Sinclair...and finally, the Bible.

Under Mitler, Heinrich returns to run Gronau and encounters his father. The two embrace, then begin to argue. When a four-year-old boy wanders in, Heinrich teaches him to give the Nazi salute and say...
"Heil Mitler." Once Ilsa and Fritz appear, Heinrich realizes with horror that the boy is theirs. "You're through with her," he tells Fritz. "With her and her Jewish brat."

Professor Mendelssohn is harassed in the street. In his classroom, a little boy sits in a corner wearing a dunce cap with the word "JEW." "His shirt is torn. He screams as a pen strikes and imbeds itself in his shoulder. He pulls it out, wet with blood." Another student writes "My teacher is a Jew" on the blackboard. The students eventually drive teacher and student from the classroom.

One of the headlines in Herr Schmidt's newspaper protests the firing of Professor Mendelssohn. Another announces: "MITLER DECREES ALL ARYANS MARRIED TO JEWS MUST SEPARATE OR BE SENT TO PRISON CAMPS."

After Ilsa's brother Hans is killed, Fritz tries to convince her to cross the border. They learn that both their fathers have been killed, and Frau Mendelssohn shoots herself.

Heinrich arrives at Fritz and Ilsa's, swastika flags waving on his official car. Handing them false passports, he urges them to take his car. He will pretend they stole it. Seeing his father killed was the turning point: "Before my eyes...I have been blind—insane. How could I think that was the way to help Transylvania—by killing the finest man that ever lived. And Herr Mendelssohn—and Johann, and those thousands of others. But he made me see..."

As troops approach, Heinrich assures Fritz and Ilsa he will try to join them at the frontier and hands them a clutch of money. The Nazis begin to close in, and Heinrich throws himself in their path. He dies shooting at them, and the story ends with Fritz and Ilsa "speeding away to safety."

The producer Sam Jaffe took out full-page advertisements announcing that he had acquired the rights to Mankiewicz's "anti-Hitler motion picture depicting the sacrifices of the Jews and Catholics in a Central European Nation and the indignities to which they are being subjected." Jaffe also announced that he had resigned from RKO "to devote [his] entire time and attention to this project" and had hired "one of America's foremost dramatists" to help.

 Opposition was formidable. Although the studios' top executives were almost all Jewish, they were well aware of anti-Semitism's prevalence in American culture and the dangers it posed to them. While leaders in other industries were praised for fulfilling the American Dream, successful motion-picture business executives were routinely portrayed as ignorant, jumped-up former garment merchants—"pants pressers, delicatessen dealers, furriers, and penny showmen," as Karl K. Kitchen wrote in Columbia, the official Knights of Columbus magazine. Rather than as captains of industry, they were characterized as "moguls"—Oriental, Asiatic despots. They were maligned as greedy capitalists whose sensational products corrupted wholesome Christian Americans, especially during a time when the Depression fueled so many resentments. They knew that if they depicted Nazi abuses, they risked being branded as warmongers, trying to pull the United States into a European problem to help their co-religionists.

Studio executives also faced economic pres-
censorship efforts. MPPDA was supposed to be the industry's advocate, but its employees' sympathies ranged from well-meaning to avowedly anti-Semitic, and those with the latter sympathies were not above exploiting Jewish studio executives' apprehensions. When Nazis assaulted American Jewish employees of American film companies and pushed them out of Germany in 1933, the MPPDA spokesman presumably charged with protecting industry interests said only that "these men left the country willingly and have since returned to work there."

After Jaffe showed the Los Angeles ADL the script, some members thought it might be effective if toned down, but officially the organization opposed it.

Created in 1930, the Code by which the MPPDA regulated its members' pictures reflected the Catholic values of the Code's creators, addressing issues of profanity, alcohol and drug use, respect for clergy, nudity, sex outside of marriage, homosexuality, respect for the flag, miscegenation, and the sensibilities of other nations. MPPDA did not enforce it effectually until July 15, 1934, when Hays's assistant, Joseph I. Breen, took charge of the MPPDAs newly formed Production Code Administration (PCA). That meant the Mad Dog script was submitted during the interval between 1930 and mid-1934, a period film historians now fondly recall as Pre-Code Hollywood. During those early Depression years, studios pursued diminishing audiences with increasingly sensational films and stories filled with gangsters, violence, and less censorious treatments of sexual mores.

A week after Jaffe's announcement, Hays summoned him and Mankiewicz to his office and accused them of greed: They were exploiting "a scarehead situation for the picture which, if made, might return them a tremendous profit while creating heavy losses for the industry." Then he asked, even if they were to find a studio willing to rent them production facilities, how could they exhibit the film if all the major theaters refused them? Jaffe responded that even if he had to contend with higher costs and lower revenues, he would exhibit it in smaller theaters in lesser markets.

Mankiewicz, who was as averse to admitting a noble purpose as he was addicted to insulting more than one target at a time, undercut Jaffe's honorable declaration by seeing and raising Hays's accusation of (Jewish) greed. He said he had written Mad Dog with "the esthetic tastes of the public" in mind and "for the same reason that Hollywood producers had made Baby Face, Melody Cruise, and So This Is Africa." With his usual wit, Mankiewicz simultaneously repudiated his and Jaffe's obvious idealism; ridiculed the industry for the triviality of its output; mocked the MPPDA for hypocrisy; and exposed its regulatory code as ineffective. All three of his examples were major studios' recent releases; all three were MPPDA-approved; and all three pushed sexual, rather than political, boundaries. Hays was not amused.

As Jaffe set up an office and hired the playwright Lynn Root to work on the script, a number of Jewish organizations mobilized. They, too, wanted Americans informed about Hitler and the Nazis, but they wanted the word spread by non-Jewish messengers. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which had been organized in 1913 specifically to combat anti-Semitism, joined studio heads and the MPPDA in actively opposing the realization of Mad Dog. They feared it would provoke accusations of Jewish warmongering, and they worried that if it failed commercially, it would demonstrate American apathy to Hitler or even pave the way for pro-Nazi films. After Jaffe showed the Los Angeles ADL the script, some members thought it might be effective if toned down, but officially the organization opposed it.

In August 1933, Mankiewicz and Jaffe conceded defeat. They might use the title at some future time, Mankiewicz told a Los Angeles ADL official, but if they did, they would make it more a "newsreel type" picture. ADL officials took the precaution of alerting potential sources of money anyway, in case Jaffe tried again.

By September, Jaffe also needed to get back to work, so he sold Mad Dog rights to Al Rosen, a tough agent eager to make his mark as a producer. Rosen went to Paris to meet with Billy Wilder, Paul Kohner, and Sam Spiegel, all Austrian or Austro-Hungarians, but he too was unable to secure funding. After that, Rosen embarked on one scheme after another, including hiring a Hitler lookalike to generate publicity. Eventually, he convinced New York philanthropist Samuel Untermeyer to finance it, but ADL members interceded and Untermeyer withdrew. In October 1933, Herman Mankiewicz asked to have his name removed from the script.

Once the new Production Code went into effect in mid-1934, Rosen had to deal with Joseph Breen, a
known anti-Semite who pulled no punches. “Because of the large number of Jews active in the motion picture industry in this country, the charge is certain to be made that the Jews, as a class, are behind an anti-Hitler picture and using the entertainment screen for their own personal propaganda purposes,” Breen said. “The entire industry, because of this, is likely to be indicted for the action of a mere handful.” Some believed “that such a picture is an out-and-out propaganda picture” that “might establish a bad precedent. The purpose of the screen, primarily, is to entertain and not to propagandize. To launch such a picture might result in a kind of two-edged sword, with the screen being used for propaganda purposes not so worthy, possibly as that suggested by THE MAD DOG OF EUROPE idea.”

As the ADL executives had feared, Breen explicitly suggested that anti-Semites deserved equal time. “It is to be remembered that there is strong pro-German and anti-Semitic feeling in this country, and, while those who are likely to approve of an anti-Hitler picture may think well of such an enterprise,” Breen said, “they should keep in mind that millions of Americans might think otherwise.” By then, he had reinforcements. Nazi censors were already screening everything coming into Germany, but to stamp out offending material at the source, they sent German consul Dr. Georg Gyssling to Hollywood to work with studios on scripts before they were even produced.

Rosen did not give up. In 1935 Italy invaded Ethiopia, at which time the press began referring to Benito Mussolini as “the mad dog of Europe.” Rosen kept at it. Again announcing production plans, he said the picture would be accompanied by a novel of the same name. In July 1935, Joseph Goebbels and the German Film Board of Censors notified MGM’s foreign department that “photoplays written by Herman J. Mankiewicz” would not be allowed into Germany unless Mankiewicz’s name was removed. There was no accompanying explanation.

Mankiewicz had spent the previous two years turning out MGM fluff, and, if anything, his 1934 Stamboul Quest, a caper starring Myrna Loy, was a sympathetic portrayal of an actual World War I German spy. His most recent picture was Escapade, an adaptation of Walter Reisch’s turn-of-the-century Viennese drawing-room romance, Maskerade. A number of censors had objected to the line “A woman in that condition should be seen by two men only; her husband and her doctor, and I am both,” but that risqué reference to pregnancy hardly seemed sufficient to trigger a Nazi ban from the highest level, and only against Herman Mankiewicz.

The New York Times coyly speculated that since his films “contained no references to the present German Government or any of its officials,” perhaps its ad hominem ban was attributable to “the writer’s ‘non-Aryanism.’” Or might it be because “the writer contemplated a film production of The Mad Dog of Europe a few years ago.” It was “generally understood” that he had abandoned the project “on the advice of influential American Jews,” who feared “bitter consequences for their coreligionists in Germany.” As the only screenwriter the Nazis singled out, Mankiewicz wore the distinction with honor.

With membership in the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League exceeding 4,000 in 1936, Rosen approached the U.S. State Department about the film and came close to convincing Sol Lesser to produce it at RKO. Then the State Department contacted the MPPDA, and Breen sent the State Department and Lesser his 1934 memo, and again killed the project.

In 1937 Rosen announced that after conducting a poll to measure the appeal of an anti-Nazi film with a script “by Herman Mankiewicz, Lynn Root and [Albert] Rosen,” he planned to proceed without the blessing of a Production Code seal. Furthermore, he would not reveal casting until shooting began, “because of the incident in which Dr. George Gyssling, local German consul, figured in connection with The Road Back.” When Universal adapted Erich Maria Remarque’s sequel to All Quiet on the Western Front, Gyssling had pressured Universal but also had warned individual actors and technicians that if the film offended the Germans, Germany would not only ban that picture but might ban their past, present, and

Al Rosen approached the U.S. State Department about the movie and came close to convincing Sol Lesser to produce it at RKO.

future films. Universal capitulated, transforming Remarque’s anti-Nazi film into a comedy.

That attempt failed as well, and by then events were overtaking the screenplay. A January 1938 episode of Time’s “March of Time” newsreel/documentary series revealed more about Hitler and the Nazis than the public had hitherto seen, and refugees were trickling into the United States. Despite the fact that income from the countries under fascist rule had already dried up, the major studios continued to reject hard-hitting
projects, though they released a few that were at least implicitly anti-Nazi, including *The Three Comrades* (1938), which Herman’s brother Joseph L. Mankiewicz produced. Around this time, Rosen published *Mad Dog* as a novel, supposedly written by the pseudonymous “Albert Nesor” (Rosen spelled backward).

In 1939, six long years after Herman Mankiewicz had first tried to warn the public, Al Rosen continued to publicly credit Mankiewicz, Lynn Root, and himself as *Mad Dog*’s creators, and to milk every name or connection he could conjure. He even tried hiring Hitler’s sister-in-law as the film’s adviser. Finally, Breen grudgingly approved the script as a “fair” representation of “prominent people and citizenry,” though he cautioned that such a film was “enormously dangerous from the standpoint of political censorship outside the United States,” so Rosen would likely encounter “serious difficulty” in marketing it overseas.

Then Breen engaged in the usual Code negotiations, and his objections, given the subject matter, can only be described as bizarre. Rosen was to remove the “obvious homosexual” character—“I think you know that any suggestion, or even the slightest inference, of sex perversion is not acceptable.” Expletives “For God’s sake,” “Oh God,” and “God” were to be eliminated. Breen also warned that “political censor boards” frequently eliminated “blood suckers” and would likely also delete the image of a swastika fading into the figure of a crucified Christ. He noted that the British censors were unlikely to allow the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, and he urged Rosen to shoot the riot scenes so that they were not “too realistically brutal or gruesome”—they should show no dead bodies, either in those sequences or in the morgue. Then there was Breen’s attention to national sensibilities. “It is our thought that even though the expression ‘the French are a nation of niggers’ may be an authentic quotation [of Hitler’s], its repetition is likely to give offense to the French nation and people, and it might be well for you to consider dropping the expression entirely.”

It appeared as if production would begin at last at Denham Film Studios outside London, with distribution by Columbia Pictures. But *Mad Dog*’s moment had passed. *Hitler, Beast of Berlin* opened in October 1939, with a press kit suggesting that exhibitors hang photos of Hitler, dress a young man as a storm trooper, and build a concentration-camp torture box. In 1940 MGM released *The Mortal Storm*, a Nazi-era love triangle among a Jewish woman (Margaret Sullavan), a Christian Communist (James Stewart), and a Christian Nazi (Robert Young) that bore some resemblance to *Mad Dog*. Although it had been adapted from a 1938 Phyllis Bottome novel, Rosen filed suit in 1943, alleging plagiarism by the film’s writers, director, producer, and studio.

Second Circuit Court of Appeals judge Learned Hand finally decided against Rosen in 1947—two years after the Nazis were finally vanquished. ➤
Susan Sontag, Savant-Idiot
The life and times of a literary celebrity
By Joseph Epstein

Serious-minded people have few ideas. People with ideas are never serious.
—PAUL VALÉRY

A

N IDIOT SAVANT, as is well-known, is a person with serious learning disabilities but gifted in a peculiar and extraordinary way, often mathematically or musically. A savant-idiot, as is not well-known, since I have only just now coined the phrase, is a person who is learned, brainy, even brilliant, but gets everything important wrong. Simone Weil, who starved herself for the good of humankind, was a savant-idiot. So was Jean-Paul Sartre, never giving up on revolutionary Communism even in the face of the mass murders of Stalin and Mao. Hannah Arendt, who wrote a significant book on the crushing oppression of totalitarianism and then turned round to argue that Jews faced with the most systematically murderous totalitarian system of all conspired in their own death, was yet a third savant-idiot.

The classic American savant-idiot was Susan Sontag. This is the Susan Sontag who called white civilization “the cancer of human history.” She it was who, after a trip to Hanoi during the Vietnam War, idealized the North Vietnamese and said, “They genuinely believe life is simple . . . full of joy . . . they genuinely love and admire their leaders.” She claimed that the more than 3,000 innocent people killed on 9/11 in effect had it coming to them, for America, through its imperialist policies, had brought this attack on itself. Sontag waited until 1982 to decide that Communism was little more than “fascism with a human face” (what, one wondered at the time, was the least bit human about it?). Only a savant could be so idiotic.

Joseph Epstein is the author, most recently, of Charm: The Elusive Enchantment (Lyons Press).
At her death, the *New York Times* printed no fewer than four photographs with her obituary. Sontag was, no doubt about it, intellectual cheesecake.

A savant is a thinker, someone less specialized than a scholar or scientist; he or she is a generalist, an intellectual. The word *savant* is of course French, and while there have been and are English, German, Italian, and American savants, the French have long bred the savant, or intellectual, in its purest type. “To tell about him,” wrote the 19th-century Russian novelist Nikolai Leskov of one of his characters, “one should be French, because only the people of that nation manage to explain to others things that they don’t understand themselves.” In her literary and philosophical enthusiasms, Susan Sontag aspired to French intellectuality in all its abstract loftiness, and, fair to say, she often achieved it.

Sontag’s life, now documented by two biographies, various memoirs, and the publication of large portions of her own journals, provides the best example of how a savant-idiot is formed. Born Susan Rosenblatt in 1933, Sontag never really knew her father, who traveled extensively in China for his fur business and died when she was five years old. She took up the more rhythmic, trochaic name of Susan Sontag from Nathan Sontag, her mother’s second husband.

The young Susan Sontag lived with a mother who largely turned her upbringing over to nannies. Starved for affection, she retreated into books. In high school, already a subscriber to the *Reader’s Digest*, she read a copy of Kant behind the *Partisan Review* she read a copy of Kant behind the *Reader’s Digest* the class was assigned to read. At 16, she attended the University of California at Berkeley, where she explored the gay underground of San Francisco and had her first lesbian experiences. The following year she went off to the University of Chicago. There the critic Kenneth Burke claimed “she was the best student I ever had” and called a paper she had written for him “stunning.” At Chicago, after little more than a week-long romance, she accepted the marriage proposal of a 12-years-older instructor named Philip Rieff. A son, David, was born two years later.

Benjamin Moser, Sontag’s most recent and authorized biographer, holds that Sontag’s relationship with her mother early settled her character and hence her fate. Her mother, said to be quite beautiful on the model of the actress Joan Crawford, was an alcoholic, neither mean nor boisterous, but one who retreated to her bedroom, there to achieve quiet oblivion by drink. “Our mother never really knew how to be a mother,” Susan’s three-years-younger sister Judith said. In her journal, Susan wrote: “I was (felt) profoundly neglected, ignored, unperceived as a child.” Her mother treated her not with cruelty but with indifference, which from a parent may be the greatest cruelty of all.

This same indifference, in Benjamin Moser’s reading, left Susan Sontag perpetually off-key in her behavior, in her understanding of others, in her exaggerated self-regard. His account of her life, though on the whole admiring, is in good part a chronicle of her misperceptions, outlandish behavior, broken relationships, including with her son and only child.

Of her marriage to Philip Rieff, she claimed that “not only was *I* Dorothea [from George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*] but that I had married Mr. Causabon.” A comic touch in connection with their divorce is that Rieff and Sontag apparently came to blows over who would get to keep the couple’s collection of back issues of *Partisan Review*.

In compensation for her mother’s indifference, Susan Sontag did her best to arrange her life so that the world would never be indifferent to her. Her weapons in this endeavor were her wide and international reading; her keen sense of the zeitgeist, or spirit of the time; and her highly photogenic good looks.

As for those good looks—tall, dark, with lush long hair and pleasing strong features, every young man’s fantasy notion of a bohemian lover—it is not easy to calibrate to what extent they figured in Sontag’s fame. Her writing alone, which was often abstruse, without distinctive style, often reading as if a translation from the French (“The thinness of my writing,” she noted in her journal. “It’s meager, sentence by sentence—too architectural, discursive.”) is unlikely to have received the attention it did had it been written by a plain young woman named Susan Rosenblatt. At her death, the *New York Times* printed no fewer than four photographs with her obituary. Sontag was, no doubt about it, intellectual cheesecake.

She was also, as Benjamin Moser writes, “America’s last great literary star, a flashback to a time when writers could be, more than simply respected or well-regarded, famous.” How her fame came about is perhaps of greater interest than anything Sontag wrote over a career of nearly 50 years. As F.R. Leavis said of the Sit-
Her relations with male lovers were for the most part casual, transitory. Those with women, of longer duration, left her confused and often heartbroken.

Well in England, Susan Sontag, one often feels, belongs less to the history of literature than to that of publicity.

Her CELEBRITY began in 1964 with an essay called “Notes on ‘Camp.’” The essay was a study of sensibility, homosexual sensibility chiefly, one that was “wholly aesthetic.” Camp was about “the spirit of extravagance,” about “a seriousness that fails.” Positing a comic vision of the world, “the whole point of camp is to dethrone the serious.”

What is most interesting about the essay is Sontag’s far-flung connections and examples of camp, perhaps the best of which come from the movies. Camp movie actors in her reading included “the corny flamboyant femaleness of Jayne Mansfield, Gina Lollobrigida, Jane Russell, Virginia Mayo; the exaggerated he-manness of Steve Reeves, Victor Mature. The great stylists of temperament and mannerism, like Bette Davis, Barbara Stanwyck, Tallulah Bankhead, Edwige Feuillere.” Other examples in the essay are less telling. What is campy about “much of Mozart,” for one, or “the qualities of excruciation in Henry James,” for another, beats me.

“Notes on ‘Camp’” was published in Partisan Review, a magazine that never had more than 5,000 readers. But in that day the editors of the mass-market magazines scoured it and other little magazines for news of the next great thing, and “Notes on ‘Camp,’” announcing a new sensibility, qualified beautifully. The essay was quickly taken up by Time and discussed in the New York Times Magazine. Thought among the hippest of the hip and dazzlingly attractive into the bargain, its author became grist for Vogue, dined with Jacqueline Kennedy and Leonard Bernstein, became a celebrity herself. She would later be on the cover of Vanity Fair; play in Woody Allen’s movie Zelig; be photographed by Andy Warhol, Joseph Cornell, Richard Avedon, her lover Annie Leibovitz, and others; and appear in an Absolut Vodka ad.

Sontag also became the enemy of those who held high culture to be sacrosanct. “One cheats oneself, as a human being,” Sontag writes in “Notes on ‘Camp,’” “if one has respect only for the style of high culture, whatever else one may do or feel on the sly.” Sontag was proposing more than merely an interest in popular culture. Her essay was in fact an attack on the importance of content in art. Camp, for her, “incarnates a victory of ‘style’ over ‘content,’ ‘aesthetics’ over ‘morality,’ of irony over tragedy.” She offered a mild disclaimer about her own position: “I am strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended by it.” But it was as the Queen of Camp, its champion and explicator, that she initially achieved prominence.

Benjamin Moser quotes Hilton Kramer against the essay. In vaunting the aesthetic over the moral, Kramer wrote, Sontag made “the very idea of moral discrimination seem stale and distinctly un-chic.” Inside Partisan Review itself, there was opposition to publishing “Notes on ‘Camp.’” It came from Philip Rahv, one of the magazine’s two co-editors, who thought Susan Sontag had bad news generally and loathed this essay in particular. Sontag, apparently, was undaunted. She ended her other famous essay of the time, “Against Interpretation,” by writing: “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art.”

Which brings one to the erotics of Susan Sontag. She was, technically, bisexual, but, like most bisexuals, favored her homosexual side. In instinct and inclination, she was lesbian, though she preferred not to have this public knowledge. Until nearly the end of her life, for example, her sister did not know Susan was lesbian. Her relations with male lovers were for the most part casual, transitory. Those with women, of longer duration, left her confused and often heartbroken.

Jasper Johns, Joseph Brodsky, Warren Beatty, and her publisher Roger Straus were among Sontag’s male liaisons. One of Moser’s more interesting revelations is the extent to which Roger Straus in effect supported Sontag, paying most of her bills and later in her career proffering an $800,000 advance on four books, even though her books did not sell well. She slept, apparently once, with Robert Kennedy, and also, in the Kennedy circle, with Richard Goodwin, to whom she paid what I consider perhaps the greatest mixed compliment I have ever come across: “The ugliest person I’ve ever slept with was the best in bed.”

Benjamin Moser, himself gay, takes Sontag to task for not coming out and announcing her own homosexuality during the AIDS epidemic. It would, he claims, have had a great effect in helping reduce the stigma then associated with homosexuality generally. “Silence=Death” was a motto of the anti-AIDS campaign of that day. Sontag held back. She didn’t want to
Susan Sontag was very much an establishment figure—established, that is, among the radical left and among what remained of the avant-garde.

be reduced to being a lesbian, or even merely a woman, writer. Her ambitions were grander than that.

One can tell a good deal about a person, and especially about a writer, by his or her admirations. In Sontag’s case, two prominent savant-idiots were among them. She much admired Arendt—“the kind of writer she wanted to be,” Moser writes, “a woman but a writer first of all”—and took her as a model writer. She also greatly esteemed Sartre. “I realize how important Sartre has been to me,” Sontag wrote in her journal. “He is the model—that abundance, that lucidity, that knowingness...” Walter Benjamin, Moser reports, occupied “pride of place” in her personal pantheon. Her admiration for Paul Goodman, a 1960s guru, was unbounded: “He was our Sartre and our Cocteau.” She praised the avant-garde composer John Cage. She saw herself in the intellectual line of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and the Romanian aphorist E.M. Cioran. She esteemed Antonin Artaud, Samuel Beckett, and Roland Barthes. Not a lot of laughs here.

Unlike many of these figures, Susan Sontag was herself very much an establishment figure—established, that is, among the radical left and among what remained of the avant-garde. A regular contributor to the New York Review of Books, she was a figure of the 1960s, a member of high standing of elite leftism. Her Against Interpretation appeared in 1967 and was, according to Camille Paglia, “among a dozen books that defined the cultural moment and seemed to herald a dawning age of revolutionary achievement, by students of the Sixties as well as Sontag herself.”

Sontag may have been radical, she may have been wildly detached from reality, but she was never unfashionable. However outré her opinions, however abstruse her writing, the world had nonetheless decided to shower its attentions on her. She claimed to have no interest in fame, yet, Jasper Johns reported, “she very early on believed she would win the Nobel Prize” and at the end of her life fell into depression when J.M. Coetzee, and not she, won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2003.

Much of Sontag’s nonfiction—her books On Photography and Illness as Metaphor, her essays, and the rest—is an elaborate attempt to grasp reality behind the various screens and masks the world tends to place before it and the metaphors used to describe it. (“Metaphors mislead,” she wrote in her essay “On Style.”) Yet she was oddly miscast for the task. The photographer Lisette Model wrote of On Photography that “this is a book by a woman who knows everything and understands nothing.” Many of her friends and others who knew her attested to Susan Sontag’s inability to put herself in the place of others. “She was not smart or intuitive emotionally,” a friend named Don Levine told Moser. Joan Acocella, interviewing her late in life for a New Yorker profile, was astonished at how extraordinarily unaware of herself she was. After spending time in Sarajevo during the Bosnian crisis, she began to think of herself as Joan of Arc, a self-image that did not get in the way of her ordering vast quantities of caviar on her friend Larry McMurtry’s tab.

None of these qualities, or rather absence of qualities, made for the accomplished novelist Susan Sontag hoped to become. As Moser notes, “she recognized her own inability to write narrative fiction.” Herbert Marcuse, who for a period lived with Sontag and Philip Rieff, said that “she could make a theory out of a potato peel,” but, without a feeling for experience and understanding of other people, she never wrote fiction with characters who came alive. As a young woman, she much admired the arid, idea-driven fictions of Nathalie Sarraute and Alain Robbe-Grillet (an admiration she later disavowed). Moser, who wishes to put the best face on Sontag’s fiction, calls her novels “brave, noble failures—unforgettable.” Brave and noble, I am not prepared to say, but I can personally attest that they are eminently forgettable. “Maybe art has to be boring, now,” she wrote, and hers—including her fiction and two films shot in Sweden—all driven solely by ideas, too often was.

The last sentence of Moser’s Susan Sontag reads: “And she warned against the mystifications of photographs and portraits: including those of biographers.” In his biography, Moser, I believe, came to praise Susan Sontag. Biographer and subject, after all, seem to share the same politics, that of conventional American leftism. He gives her writing the benefit of nearly every doubt. In his summing-up final pages, he writes that, though her answers to
Her views were standard left-wing ones. She couldn’t seem to imagine figures of greater evil than Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. She early revered Fidel Castro.

the questions of the day may not always have been right, she, for nearly 50 years, “more than any other prominent public thinker, had set the terms of the cultural debate in a way no intellectual had done before or has done since.”

Yet Sontag did not make it easy, even for an admiring biographer. In Moser’s biography, it soon enough becomes plain that she was, not to put too fine a point on it, not a nice person. Once fame had arrived, she became a diva, with all the deficiencies of temperament inherent in the role but without the great voice for justification. The record of Sontag’s kindly and generous acts is brief; that of her egotism, selfishness, and cruelty, copious.

For openers, the Susan Sontag who resented the inattention of her mother was herself a less than attentive mother. She often exclaimed her love for her son to various friends. Yet early in the child’s life she abandoned him to spend a year in Oxford. At age four, she had him reading Candide, Gulliver’s Travels, Homer; at eleven, she had him reading War and Peace. Maria Irene Fornés, a Cuban-American playwright and one of her lovers, thought she gave David, in Moser’s words, “a bad combination of too much latitude and too little attention, and told her so.” Another lover, Eva Kollisch, said, “I think she shortchanged him of a lot of love and affection.” She often deposited the boy in the care of others and pretty much left him to raise himself. The writer Jamaica Kincaid wrote that “she really wanted to be a great mother, but it was sort of like wanting to be a great actress, or something... I would say there was [in Susan] no real instinct for caring for another person unless they were in a book.”

In Moser’s biography several people attest to Sontag’s insensitivity, her tactlessness, her humorlessness, her self-grandiosity. “It was not that she wanted to hurt people,” said a friend who knew her from University of Chicago days. “It was that she was simply oblivious.” Eva Kollisch claimed that Sontag “was one of the most immoral people I ever knew.” Moser records that she had no compunction about sleeping with her best friend’s husband. She saw nothing wrong with regularly humiliating Annie Leibovitz, her last and perhaps most faithful lover, a woman Benjamin Moser estimates spent more than $8 million on her. Sontag corrected Leibovitz’s grammar and pointed out her ignorance in public.

Sontag was also ignorant of the basic facts of life. On more than one occasion Moser refers to her poor hygiene: “not brushing her teeth or bathing, not knowing that she was going to get her period or that childbirth was painful.” She early went on amphetamines, to stay awake and hasten her writing, and suffered the effects in mood swings, rudeness, loneliness, and fear of abandonment. She was one of those people who needed others to clean up after her, and she found them in paid assistants, editors, friends, sycophants. She couldn’t stand to be alone yet treated nearly everyone near her badly.

The most controversial aspect of Moser’s biography is his repeated assertion that Sontag, in her late teens, actually wrote Rieff’s career-making study, a book entitled Freud, The Mind of the Moralist. Sontag herself claimed it was so, and Moser takes it for the truth. At various places, he writes sentences that begin “As she wrote in The Mind of the Moralist...” My own guess is that Sontag did what in the trade is known as a heavy edit of her husband’s book. Rieff, true enough, was not an easy writer, but he could be a powerfully intelligent one, and his Triumph of the Therapeutic (1966) is one of the key books of the past half century. No 19-year-old girl, no matter how precocious, could have written Freud: The Mind of the Moralist.

HOW, THEN, could a woman who was so inadequate a mother, so untrustworthy a friend, so out of touch with the most commonplace realities, have been a penetrating analyst of culture and politics? The short answer is that she wasn’t.

In politics, Susan Sontag’s views were standard left-wing ones. She couldn’t seem to imagine figures of greater evil than Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. She early revered Fidel Castro. She condemned that by now hoary leftist cliché, the consumer society. All this dovetailed nicely into her general anti-Americanism. In 1967, she declared that “living in the United States hurts so much. It’s like having an ulcer all the time.” America was for her a “too white, death-ridden culture.” All this culminated in her notorious incendiary New Yorker statement that on 9/11 America got what it deserved.

Sontag’s observations on culture, though pitched
on a higher level, were scarcely more subtle. Consider her youthful reverence for the films of Leni Riefenstahl, *The Triumph of the Will* and *The Olympiad*, both produced under the Nazis. “The Nazi propaganda is there,” she wrote in her essay “On Style.” “But something else is there, too, which we reject at our loss... these two films of Riefenstahl (unique among works of Nazi artists) transcend the categories of propaganda or even reportage.... Through Riefenstahl’s genius as a film-maker, the ‘content’ has—even against her intentions—come to play a purely formal role.” Later, Sontag would, as we now say, walk back her views of Riefenstahl, but not her view that a central concern with the content of art was to miss its point and was essentially to prove yourself a Philistine. What eluded her was that style was the way an artist, any artist, views the world—that style is, in the end, content.

Friends claimed that Susan Sontag was blind to much visual art; others that, though she regularly dragged herself to the opera and concerts, she was not truly responsive to music. Ideas, and ideas alone, lit her fire. Her own ideas in the political realm unfortunately were unoriginal; those in the realm of culture, unhelpful. Yet the utter absorption in ideas, which permits no contradiction from experience, no rebuff from reality, is the hallmark of the savant-idiot, and what made Susan Sontag the American savant-idiot par excellence.
The Tragedy of the One-Drop Rule

Self-Portrait in Black and White: Unlearning Race
By Thomas Chatterton Williams
W. W. Norton & Company, 192 pages

Reviewed by Wilfred Reilly

Thomas Chatterton Williams’s Self-Portrait in Black and White is a book about one man’s decision to “renounce” race, as a concept and identity. Williams opens his book with the delivery-room discovery that he has fathered a tiny human whom most seeing people would view as white. Although Williams is biracial—the son of an erudite Southern black man and a “blonde-haired, blue-eyed” mother of Northern European origins—he declares that he has always viewed himself as black, in accordance with the old American idea that “one drop” of African blood makes a person a Negro. Judging from his book-jacket photo, Williams also seems to be someone who “looks black,” a light-brown guy at least as dark-skinned as I am. However, having a daughter with a white Frenchwoman forces him to challenge this view: Young Marlow is 80 percent or so nonblack and “impossibly fair-skinned.”

To his credit, Williams responds to this situation not by at all distancing himself from his daughter or wife, but rather by deconstructing the basic idea of race. He notes, correctly, that the historical American black experience had little to do with “strict genetic markers”—after all, mulatto byblows of slave masters and honey-blond “palomino” girls were brutalized on Southern plantations alongside new arrivals from the Slave and Pepper Coasts. In such a context, any part-African person was, practically speaking, politically black. However, today, as ideas of whiteness and what Williams calls “mixed race nonblackness” become more flexible, it is hard not to notice that many “black” Americans don’t look very African at all—and, for that matter, that many dark-haired, black-eyed whites obviously have more than...
a touch of ancestral Moorish or Indian blood. In this context, what sense do racial labels make, and what value do they have?

None, Williams concludes. By the end of book’s first section, Williams has stated that he, his beloved daughter, and many of his friends are clearly neither black nor white; described the entire idea of biogenetic race as a “calamitous thought” inspired by the racism of the European Enlightenment; and has openly decided to reject the whole troubled construct. Williams encourages others to do the same. He eloquently describes racial categories as meaningless for most people and gives the example of a hypothetical East Indian man, who would have been classified as a “Hindu” from 1920 to 1940, “other” from 1950 to 1960, and a white from 1970 until recently. Today, quite probably, the same fellow would be reclassified as “Asian.” Why bother with any of this, Williams asks, when such categories cannot adequately capture this man, or anyone else?

A good question. As a black man, a writer on race, and a quantitative wonk, I have several responses to it, and to Williams’s book (which I liked) more generally. First, I feel he is frankly wrong that racial categories are meaningless and almost endlessly plastic. Ironically, the idea that race is entirely a social construct seems to have taken hold outside the academy during the same period—from the early ’00s on—when reliable genetic testing became popular and widespread. Using contemporary haplotype data, the genetics website 23andMe divides humankind into six large “global populations”—European, West Asian and North African, Central and South Asian, East Asian and Native American, Sub-Saharan African, and Melanesian. These can be further subdivided into 150 “ancestry composition” groups (e.g., Ashkenazi Jewish). If there exists any particular reason not to call these subdivisions 1) “races” and 2) “ethnicities,” or to behave as though dividing up a room full of Norwegians, Ghanaians, and Koreans on the basis purely of physical characteristics would be especially difficult, I cannot discern it using elementary logic.

Williams of course correct that the human races can blend, and often improve by doing so. But, to me, the people produced by these blendings are not without race but rather simply inter-racial, and the degree to which different groups have contributed to their backgrounds can be measured quite specifically. At one point in Self-Portrait, for example, Williams does take a DNA test and finds himself to be exactly 39.9 percent Sub-Saharan Black African and 58.7 percent Northern European. There seems to be no logical reason he could not describe himself as “mixed,” or “mulatto,” or that his daughter might not call her background “mostly white but with some black ancestors.” I myself have a small but substantial percentage of (Native) Indian blood and try to remain linked to this aspect of my heritage by doing things like shooting the bow. Being of multiple races does not, I think, require identifying as a race-less man.

However, while making his epistemological way toward the complete rejection of race, Williams notes what many might consider to be a better solution to the racial obsessions of today. He points out that the modern American conception of race is very highly “classed.” This is to say: Different groups that differ on the matter of the potentially irrelevant trait of skin color also tend to differ in terms of serious variables like income, education, and behavior. The result of this is that a great many traits are perceived as racial when they are actually social-class or even regional characteristics. In one great passage utterly familiar to me as a Chicagoan, Williams tells the story of an Italian-American family friend who refers to Williams’s bookish black dad as “whiter” than his own relatives, and proceeds to defend this position coherently for some time. In another, a college girlfriend describes her European-immigrant mother from Brooklyn as “not a...white woman”—meaning, in essence, “not a cheery suburbanite.”

In addition to being surprisingly funny and touching, these anecdotes help illuminate a way forward. As several social scientists have pointed out, race is a source of surprisingly little animus when it comes to groups who vary only in terms of this one characteristic.
Asian Americans, for example, perform (at least) on par with whites in terms of “classed” characteristics such as personal income and scholastic test scores. They also frankly seem to be one of the most successfully “assimilated” groups in the country: reporting relatively little racial tension, marrying members of other races 29 to 33 percent of the time, and posting by far the lowest violent-crime rate of all major groups.

Given this data, it seems indisputable that a good way to reduce the salience of race would be for Americans to work together to 1) build a shared national identity and 2) honestly identify and then eliminate those negative nonracial characteristics associated with each racial group: disproportionately high crime rates and a simmering sense of being “oppressed” among blacks, more than a little residual racism among whites, a lack of English competency among many Latinos and immigrants, and so forth. Obviously, no sane person wants all Americans of every ethnic background to abandon their cultural characteristics and become upper-middle-class Anglo-Saxons—imagine the terrible food, if nothing else. But a society in which whites and blacks vary chiefly in terms of skin color itself, rather than, say, “perception of the government as run by genocidal racists,” would be a society far freer of racial conflict.

But Williams’s book also identifies what may well be the primary barrier to manifesting that society: the extraordinary prevalence of the “one-drop rule” of racial identification dreamed up by Southern slaveholders among American minorities, especially those on the political left. Throughout Self-Portrait, Williams repeatedly discusses the fact that African Americans of all ages and social positions often simply assume that anyone with any amount of black ancestry is black and that all share at least some current experience of oppression. Williams himself appears to have believed this prior to the birth of his baby girl, and he describes his father continuing to refer to his blond granddaughter as simply a light-skinned “palomino.”

More important, Williams, coming close to taboo territory, points out that many modern black cultural figures—Jesse Williams, Colin Kaepernick, even Barack Obama—are obviously at least 50 percent Caucasian and were raised largely by Caucasian family members but continue to identify as African Americans facing contemporary oppression because of the one-drop rule. Obviously, convincing people either that race does not exist or that it does but matters little will require first disabusing them of the idea that being any percentage African is one of the most important things in the world.

Whether more people do in fact come to accept either thesis remains to be seen. In the meantime, read Thomas Chatterton Williams’s engaging account of himself as a “black” man with a “white” daughter.\[1\]

Godsforsaken

Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West
By R. R. Reno
Gateway Editions, 207 pages
Reviewed by Richard M. Reinsch

IN HIS NEW book, R. R. Reno seeks to reacquaint us with the moral and political significance of what the sociologist Emile Durkheim called the “strong gods,” which Reno describes as “love of the divine, love of truth, love of country, love of family.” He wants to wean Westerners from the 20th century’s “postwar consensus” that still unites us “culturally, even spiritually” around “anti-totalitarian, anti-fascist, and anti-nationalist” narratives. These narratives have committed us to worshipping “weak gods”—openness, diversity, multiculturalism—to protect us from the strong gods of nation and religion that might turn back the clock to 1939 or 1914.

The postwar consensus once made sense, Reno says, but in our day its imperatives have become “flesh-eating dogmas” that deprive us of solidarity. Reno sensibly observes: “It is not 1939. Our societies are not...marching in lockstep. Central planners do not clog our economies. There is no longer an overbearing bourgeois culture bent on ‘exclusion.’” It is time for the weak gods, spawned by a 20th century that seems to be refusing to end, to be ushered off the stage. It is time for the “return of the strong gods.”

The acids of free trade, identity politics, multiculturalism, mass migration, gender fluidity, drug overdoses, and abortion are dissolving our societies, Reno claims.

Commentary
The postwar consensus in many ways caused or reinforced these baleful trends and is incapable of confronting them. The enforcement arm of the consensus views the rise of populist politics through exclusively anti-fascist, anti-racist lenses and therefore condemns it without understanding that such politics might be the rattle of great confusion and anomie. In this regard, Reno asserts that “Trump, Viktor Orbán, and other populist challengers are not choirboys or immaculate liberals.” But, Reno says, “their limitations are not nearly as dangerous to the West as the fanaticism of our leadership class, whose hyper-moralistic sense of mission—either us or Hitler!—prevents us from addressing our economic, demographic, cultural, and political problems.” An elite class that insists on addressing these evident problems in our politics and culture with more “openness” and politically correct policing “will shipwreck our nations.”

Our times demand the recovery of the strong gods that can “unite societies” because they are “the objects of men’s love and devotion.” These gods of “King and country” can give us solidarity because “the ‘we’ is their gift” to us. Strong gods unite us, but as Reno also states, they can destroy us. Short shrift, though, is given to the latter concern by Reno because, he says, we have been thoroughly indoctrinated with ideologies of disenchantment that now automatically lead us away from love of country, family, and religion.

WHY DOES Reno, a Catholic and the editor of the predominantly Christian journal First Things, discourse so heavily on the strong gods? Doesn’t he want the primary stress to be on the God, and how that God both limits and legitimizes government? Reno says that Durkheim’s analysis “is not discordant with the biblical view,” because in the “Judeo-Christian tradition, governing powers are not deities, but their dictates are tinged with divine legitimacy.” The word “tinged” is doing a great deal of work in that sentence; it deserves its own chapter just to explain how that tincture works.

Reno also notes that our love for the strong gods “is always eccentric. It impels us outside ourselves, breaking the boundaries of me-centered existence. Love seeks to unite with and rest in that which is loved. This outflowing of the self makes love the engine of solidarity.” If this is true, and I believe it is true, then we better be right about not only the strong gods we love but the limitations we place on the ecstatic nature of that love.

State power is a volatile weapon, never more dangerous than when its rulers believe themselves on the side of the angels. Reno might recall the minimal consensus that shaped our country’s founding that both facilitated and limited the national government’s powers, accorded authority to the states for particular matters of self-government, and refrained from establishing a national religion while leaving state governments largely free to legislate on matters of morality and religion (a freedom the 14th Amendment later narrowed). Our political debates are still oriented broadly by the contours of this consensus, with conservatives wanting to breathe new life into it. Should the “strong gods” replace it and anchor a post-constitutional America rooted in the “we” of solidarity? It’s a question the author does not address.

Have Americans truly pulled away from national loyalty, religion, and marriage under the guise of Reno’s postwar consensus theory? The evidence is mixed. To be sure, many of our dominant intellectual motifs support Reno’s thesis. The militancy of transgender ideology, woke capitalism, and transnational progressivism on the liberal left is striking. The rise of certain secular trends such as the “nones” expressing no institutional religious belief, inclines us in the direction of obeying the weak gods. Our politics, however, remains brutally competitive. The conservative legal movement, despite the fact that progressives own much of legal pedagogy in America, punches beyond its weight. As for the decline of religion, the solution, at least for Christians, is found in the Gospel itself. I am skeptical that the strong gods are of much use on that score.

Reno heavily focuses on solidarity—defined as the historical and living elements that unite a nation—as a “ministry of the strong gods” to us here below. However, there is no mention, even in passing, of its twinned accompaniment in the principle of subsidiarity, according to which power is best and most fairly used when it is exercised closest to those who are subject to it. After all, the voices of dissolution Reno is rightly concerned with equally dismiss subsidiarity. Their universal humanitarian and egalitarian goals demand the dismantling and reworking of local and national boundaries, to say nothing of our bodies and their borders. But healthy national orders acknowledge the moral formation of their citizens in families and communities and other local and associational entities.

Likewise, there is no discussion in the book of the proper ground, nature, or use of political freedom. At one point, Reno indicts free markets as anarchistic because markets have no higher purpose. Here’s a purpose: Americans go to work every day to provide for their families and loved ones. Their
consumer purchases in large part are for the people they care about and love. This is a crucial piece of self-government in the life of a free and responsible American, as much as it’s also about markets and the good things they make possible. Part of civil order and the common good is liberty, self-governance, and local rule. While a purely autonomist liberty is dangerous to good order, authoritativeness without due regard for self-government must also be avoided.

According to Reno, one thing is sure: Postwar conservatism will be of little assistance in re-adorning the stripped altars of the strong gods. Its quarrel with the postwar left “has been a sibling rivalry.” While the left, in its commitment to openness, focused on the autonomy of the individual, the right focused on market deregulation and economic freedom. He argues that both left and right in the West agree on a technocratic, economistic politics, and are equally against “metaphysical temptations” and have “encouraged a discourse of critique that unmasked” claims of truth.

Reno is right about aspects of libertarianism and progressive ideology, but he is wrong about American conservatism as a whole. Ironically, he quotes from Richard Weaver’s Ideas Have Consequences (1948), a book that defined the intellectual horizon for many postwar conservatives in America. Weaver’s very metaphysical book argues that philosophic nominalism has become our curse and points to a return to serious classical philosophical study in order to heal the West. Other examples of postwar conservatives who wrote in a metaphysical and natural-law key, even more influential than Weaver, easily come to mind: Russell Kirk, Willmoore Kendall, Whittaker Chambers, Harry Jaffa, Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, among others. Reno’s predecessor at First Things, the late Father Richard Neuhaus, offered metaphysical and natural law teachings in virtually every number he edited, while assembling a group of ecumenical and interdisciplinary scholars who resolutely defended on metaphysical and moral terms the American founding, markets, and constitutional law. In the process, Neuhaus shaped the minds of countless conservatives.

American conservatism has struggled to stem the tide of the weak gods. It also hasn’t exactly been a fair institutional contest. Rather than displacing much of that heritage, a most un-conservative move, and substituting Reno’s “strong gods” for it, we should develop William F. Buckley Jr.’s statement of conservative belief in Up from Liberalism (1959): “freedom, individuality, the sense of community, the sanctity of the family, the supremacy of conscience, the spiritual view of life,” with each element held “in proportion as political power is decentralized.” No strong gods or weak gods are necessary.

They Don’t Wanna Work

Opting Back In: What Really Happens When Mothers Go Back to Work
By Pamela Stone and Meg Lovejoy
University of California Press, 239 pages

Reviewed by Naomi Schaefer Riley

I T’S been more than 15 years since New York Times magazine writer Lisa Belkin made a splash with her article called “The Opt-Out Revolution,” about educated mothers dropping out of high-powered positions to stay at home and raise their children. Depending on their place on the political spectrum, readers were either comforted or horrified by Belkin’s report:

Wander into any Starbucks in any Starbucks kind of neighborhood in the hours after the commuters are gone. See all those mothers drinking coffee and watching over toddlers at play? If you look past the Lycra gym clothes and the Internet-access cellphones, the scene could be the ’50s, but for the fact that the coffee is more expensive and the mothers have M.B.A.’s.

Belkin’s suggestion that America’s wealthiest and most educated couples are also the ones with the most old-fashioned domestic arrangements has been confirmed in numerous ways. The well-to-do are the most likely to get married, the least likely to divorce, and the most likely to find men earning more than women. The idea that women’s M.B.A.s turned out to be of no
more use than the MRS degrees that their mothers and grandmothers received was more than many people could bear.

A recent study found that about 20 percent of college mothers with children under 18 have opted out or are at home full-time. Around 30 or 40 percent of mothers with degrees from elite schools have at some point taken a sustained break from work. Among Harvard Business School alumnae, 30 percent had at some point been at home full-time.

But the time in which we have children at home is actually only a fraction of our working lives. So Pamela Stone and Meg Lovejoy—scholars at the City University of New York and Harvard respectively, whose work formed the basis for the original Belkin article—set out to learn what became of these Lululemon-clad former management consultants after their kids got older.

The first thing they found was that the opt-out revolutionaries stayed home longer than they had originally planned. Before having kids, many women imagine that they will take time off from work when the kids are little. They want to see the first steps, hear the first words. And they want to see their kids before early bedtimes. And, by the way, full-time child care is pretty expensive.

What these moms discovered, though, is that older kids also benefit from having their parents around more. And parents often find their older kids enjoyable. Take Meg Romano, who “reluctantly” quit her job as a financial trader after the birth of her third child and then planned to return to the workforce relatively quickly. She changed her mind. Children, she told Lovejoy and Stone, “don’t come to you and say, ‘Mom, I really need to talk to you about something important that happened at school. They tell it when you’re driving them to piano lessons, and from the back of the car comes this little voice ... In some ways, I think it’s easier for them to talk to the back of your head.”

Thus it is that many upper-middle-class women stay out of the workforce through the time their kids graduate from high school. As the authors point out, they are pouring all their energies into ensuring that their kids maintain the same class status they enjoy. Sometimes these moms may overestimate how important their time with their children is. As one explained: “My sitter can’t sit down with my 9-year-old and do a math assignment. So if I weren’t home in the afternoon to assist, I don’t think it would get done.” Really?

It is undoubtedly true, though, that for these women whose husbands work long hours and have jobs that demand constant and immediate attention, things go more smoothly with one parent managing the home front on a full-time basis. Once this division of labor is established, it becomes harder for the mother to go back to work. The authors note that “these women experienced a surprising drift to what we identify as ‘privileged domesticity.’ Over time, their new lives as at-home mothers created a heightened involvement in mothering, community volunteer work, and traditional household roles.”

Stone and Lovejoy note that much of the volunteering these women do outside of their homes is really an extension of their intensive mothering. They volunteer at school a lot—and then, when their kids graduate, they generally stop.

But for some women, these volunteer positions turn into full-time work. Many choose to work for educational institutions or local nonprofits that offer flexibility even if the paycheck is significantly lower than what they were making before they opted out.

When they opt back in, they do not want to return to their former employers. A national study found that only 5 percent of women sought to be rehired. Perhaps, as Stone and Lovejoy argue, it is because their former employers were so unyielding as to drive them out of the workplace to begin with. Or perhaps it’s because something about being at home with kids has changed their orientation. Romano tells them, “I felt like Sybil; you know I’m like trying to twist my head around to go from being, ‘I’ll scratch your eyes out over an eighth of a point’ to, you know, nurturing good mommy.”

Many of them instead decide to retool and launch themselves into professions that are entirely new or only tangentially related to what they did before. They go to work for nonprofits, schools, or philanthropies. Some have to go back to school but others are able to spin
volunteer work into connections to new fields. Still more decide to consult part time in their previous fields. Generally speaking, they have little trouble relaunching their careers. A booming economy with low rates of unemployment probably helps.

And here’s the kicker. The women actually like these new jobs better. As the authors write: “While objectively, especially with regard to pay, security and benefits, their new jobs compared invidiously to their former ones, women were much more satisfied with work the second time around.” When the authors first interviewed them about their careers, “women most often indicated mixed feelings or moderate satisfaction, and fully two-thirds reported either low or moderate levels of satisfaction. Rating their current jobs, however, women are highly satisfied, two-thirds giving them the thumbs up.”

Which is great news. Right? Stone and Lovejoy have finally found the answer to the age-old question of what women want. Oh, not so fast, the authors claim. These women may have found some kind of individual happiness. But what about the sisterhood?

Stone and Lovejoy write:

Once women are out of the labor force, their class privilege works to further undermine their gender-egalitarian aspirations by 1) keeping them out of the workforce for a longer time, seduced by the patriarchal bargain of privileged domesticity and the status maintenance imperative of their upper-middle-class form of intensive mothering and community involvement; and 2) eroding their incentive to return to elite careers while giving them the freedom to pursue work that is less lucrative but more meaningful to them.

And don’t be fooled, the authors warn, by the fact that these women say they made these decisions freely: “Their affluence, their understanding of the privilege of their position, their professed perfectionism, and their strong sense of personal agency led them to adopt the narrative of choice.” The authors also seem startled that these women continue to call themselves “feminists” even after they have damaged the cause.

These opt-outers may actually be to blame for the dearth of women in corporate leadership positions, working as partners at high-powered law firms, or working at the highest levels of politics. “The very women who are best positioned (and indeed expected) to surmount barriers and close gender gaps instead pursue career-family strategies that work for them individually, but that ultimately exacerbate and increase gender inequality overall,” Stone and Lovejoy write.

Because these highly educated women seem so intent on pursuing their own happiness and the good of their own families over what the authors see as the best avenues for the advancement of their gender, Stone and Lovejoy are forced to offer new solutions. They suggest that corporations do more to limit work hours. Since they won’t do that on their own, they suggest that the government “require...them to pay overtime to professionals and managers.”

They also recommend that we pay the same rates to male- and female-dominated professions: “The artificial, systemic, and discriminatory devaluation [of caregiving professions] obscures the fact that the care work involved in traditionally female-dominated occupations is intrinsically valuable... and meaningful.”

Finally, the authors recommend that men should do more co-parenting. There is little acknowledgement that this is already happening. The authors argue that more mandatory paternity leave will help solve this problem. But if women are happy with the current arrangement, why will having men stay home for a few more weeks significantly affect their decisions? Ultimately, the authors come clean. The goal, of course, of feminism is not to help individual women lead fulfilling lives. Instead, they write, “we need a significant shift in the social system (and balance of power) in the United States. Our prevailing form of capitalism (also known as ‘neoliberalism’) and patriarchy as we know it have to change.”

Good luck with that.
What will you read next?

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On ‘September 1, 1939’
By Terry Teachout

Precious little of the English poetry written in the 20th century has passed into the common stock of universally recognized literary reference. No doubt this is because so many of its makers chose to write free verse. Part of what makes traditional poetry (as well as the lyrics of popular songs) so readily quotable is that it lodges spontaneously in the memory because of its orderly rhyme and prosody. Whatever the merits of Robert Frost’s claim that writing free verse is like “playing tennis without a net,” it is far easier to get “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” by heart than, say, Sylvia Plath’s “Ariel.”

It makes sense, then, that after Frost and Philip Larkin, the modern English-speaking poet who is most often quoted should be W.H. Auden, a lifelong believer in the virtues of prosodic regularity. Not only is Auden easier to cite from memory because of the formal orderliness of his poems, but he frequently wrote verse whose subjects were of more obviously universal interest than the state of his psyche at any given moment. In keeping with his wish to become, “if possible, / a minor Atlantic Goethe,” he also wrote about public occasions ranging from the Spanish Civil War to the deaths of Freud and Yeats, and did so in a way that was at once beautiful and quotably pithy (“You were silly like us: your gift survived it all”). All of this helped to make Auden, in Edmund Wilson’s striking turn of phrase, “one of the most edible, one of the most satisfactory of contemporary writers in verse.” His mature poems were, almost without exception, accessible to the common reader.

Never did Auden employ his gift of accessibility more effectively than in “September 1, 1939,” the poem he wrote immediately after Nazi Germany started World War II by invading Poland. Published

The Auden Poem
Auden Hated

Terry Teachout is Commentary’s critic-at-large and the drama critic of the Wall Street Journal. Satchmo at the Waldorf, his one-man play about Louis Armstrong, has been produced off Broadway and throughout America.
in the New Republic that October, “September 1, 1939” contains within its nine 11-line trimetric stanzas more widely quoted phrases than any of Auden’s other poems. It was there that he called the ’30s “a low dishonest decade,” described the stunned members of his generation as “lost in a haunted wood,” and—most memorably—warned his readers that they “must love one another or die.”

“September 1, 1939” continues to be cited on appropriate occasions, most recently after 9/11, when it flew around the Internet at the speed of light. But Auden made no secret of disliking it, going so far as to call it “the most dishonest poem I have ever written” in a 1967 letter and dismissing it as his “least favorite” of his own poems in a later interview with the Paris Review. He cut the entire eighth stanza (in which the line about the necessity to “love one another” appears) when he included “September 1, 1939” in his 1945 Collected Poems, and then said that it was “a damned lie” to say that “we must love one another or die” and changed “or” to “and.”

As a result of these varied negative feelings, the Auden scholar Edward Mendelsohn chose to omit “September 1, 1939” from the revised edition of Collected Poems he edited in 1976, three years after the poet’s death. Yet the original version continues to be read and quoted, even in preference to Auden’s own revised version. Indeed, it was included by Mendelsohn in the shorter volume of the poet’s Selected Verse he edited three years later, declaring “September 1, 1939” to be “memorable enough to survive all of Auden’s interference.”

A poem with so knotty a history is a natural subject for illuminating book-length discussion, and Ian Sansom’s September 1, 1939: A Biography of a Poem would appear to fit the bill.** Among other fascinating details, Sansom has managed to identify the specific gay bar on Manhattan’s 52nd Street in which the opening lines of “September 1, 1939” take place.

A poem with so knotty a history is a natural subject for illuminating book-length discussion, and Ian Sansom’s September 1, 1939: A Biography of a Poem would appear to fit the bill.* Compact and chatty but packed with detail, it seeks (in the author’s words) to “demonstrate how a poem gets produced, consumed and incorporated into people’s lives.” This is a worthy goal, and to a not-inconsiderable degree Sansom’s study achieves it. Alas, Sansom, a British radio broadcaster and mystery writer, is a sickeningly coy stylist, at once self-important and self-deprecating (“I was in the slow learners’ class in school and seem to be a slow learner still”). As a result, his book, in which he unconvincingly explains on every other page why he is unworthy to write about so great a poem, puts the reader in mind of a saying of Golda Meir, “Don’t be so humble—you’re not that great.”

Given sufficient patience to put up with Sansom’s self-aggrandizing rambling, one will come away from September 1, 1939 having learned a great deal about what he rightly describes as “a poem that still reverberates with meaning and controversy, a poem that readers return to at times of personal and national crisis.” What he does not give us, though, is an unequivocal statement of what the poem means, partly because “September 1, 1939” is not without its patches of unclarity, but also, one suspects, because he himself is not fully at ease with its meaning.

UDEN’S understanding of the world around him was outstripped at first by the uncanny virtuosity with which he was able to depict it. T.S. Eliot, who recognized his phenomenal talent early on and was one of the first people to publish Auden’s work in his professional capacity as an editor for Faber & Faber, said as much at the time in a letter to a mutual friend: “I chiefly worry about Auden’s ethical principles and con-

** And Sansom is no less capable of making broader statements that are similarly convincing, one of them being his explanation of how the poem survived its author’s after-the-fact tinkering: Auden “may have attempted to hack up the poem and destroy it—but readers have saved it from dismemberment and death, time and time again, rediscovering it, reclaiming it.”

* Harper, 341 pages

** Harper, 341 pages
victions, not about his technical ability; or rather, I think that if a man's ethical and religious views and convictions are feeble or limited and incapable of development, then his technical development is restricted."

Significantly, Eliot's letter was written in 1930, the year in which Faber published Auden's first "official" volume of poetry and in which, according to Auden himself, he "began to read newspapers." It was in the same year that the 23-year-old poet, angered by the ineffectuality of inter-war English liberalism, started to engage in earnest with politics. Formidably intelligent but emotionally immature, he was inclined by temperament to try on positions in public and addicted to issuing excitingly worded but ill-considered pronouncements on all manner of subjects. Characteristically, he embraced left-wing politics with more excitement than prudence, declaring himself to be in sympathy with Marxism and the Communist Party and spending seven weeks in 1937 traveling throughout Spain in the hope of doing some kind of unspecified work in support of the left-wing Republican government. On his return, he published "Spain," a pro-Republican poem in which he ostentatiously took the side of "the deliberate increase in the chances of death, / The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder."

George Orwell, who had spent more time in Spain and understood more clearly what he saw there, excoriated Auden for that pronunciamento, tartly observing that "Mr. Auden's brand of amoralism is only possible if you are the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled. So much of left-wing thought is a kind of playing with fire by people who don't even know that fire is hot." It was, in any case, a stance that Auden would quickly come to regret, having come to the conclusion that poetry, as he wrote two years later, "makes nothing happen," least of all the kind written to serve propagandistic ends.

A mystical experience Auden underwent in 1933 had already inspired him to distrust the adequacy of purely secular solutions to the world's trials. He instead embraced an idiosyncratic but genuine brand of Christianity. The conscious acceptance of guilt and convictions not about his technical ability; or rather, I think that if a man's ethical and religious views and convictions are feeble or limited and incapable of development, then his technical development is restricted."
The enlightenment driven away,
The habit-forming pain,
Mismanagement and grief:
We must suffer them all again.

IT IS, one may safely assume, the grandly resonant generalities of “September 1, 1939” that offended their author’s postwar sensibility, in much the same way that Waugh would feel the need to prune away the “rhetorical and ornamental language” of the original version of Brideshead Revisited when he revised the novel in the early ’60s.

But Auden was wrong to think that “the whole poem...was infected with an incurable dishonesty.” Indeed, “September 1, 1939” is powerful above all because of its willingness to tell the unvarnished truth about England and Europe in the ’30s, and it is noteworthy that Sansom’s book retreats into a flurry of evasive obscurity just as Auden becomes most specific about what he has to say. For “September 1, 1939” is above all a repudiation of the “low dishonest” politics of the ’30s and an acknowledgment of the failure of left-wing ideology to provide an answer to the “psychopathic god” of Hitlerian nationalism.

Instead, as Auden had already written in The Prolific and the Devourer, a prose work left incomplete and unpublished in the summer of 1939 and cited only in passing by Sansom, the only way to make the world “impossible for Hitlers” is to “unite thought and intention and treat others with love and as equals.” This is what he means when he writes that “Hunger allows no choice / To the citizen or the police; / We must love one another or die.”

One may take leave to doubt that the author of September 1, 1939, whose own politics, as can be gathered from the book, are standard-issue contemporary British left-liberalism, would find such a position tenable. Yet it is what the author of “September 1, 1939,” chastened by the failure of his own ventures into politics and bolstered by his embrace of Christian faith, very plainly espouses therein—and it is the reason the poem continues to speak to readers who, like Auden before them, “cannot swallow another mouthful” of the totalitarian ideologies with which the repeating cycles of history present them time and again.

“May I,” he cries in its last lines, “Beleaguered by the same / Negation and despair, / Show an affirming flame.” That he succeeded in doing so in “September 1, 1939” is the reason the poem survived all his attempts to mute or suppress it, and why successive generations of readers continue to turn to it in times of trial. It is, and will always be, an affirming flame of hope.

The Grand Ole Melting Pot

On Ken Burns’s Country Music

By Lauren Weiner

NOWADAYS everybody you know could get in trouble for some act of “cultural appropriation” or other: sports teams with colonialist logos, people who aren’t Native American getting tribal tattoos, servers of bogus banh mi sandwiches on the campus of Oberlin College, Westerners who practice yoga. The mandarins of political correctness patrol the field of music with particular zeal. They are fond of saying—and they’re not wrong—that white musicians have popularized, and profited from, the work of African-American songwriters and musicians who died in obscurity. They point to the imitative quality of Elvis Presley, Eminem, or the newer rap artists such as Asher Roth (whose mother, to add insult to injury, is a yoga teacher).

Elvis, if it’s any consolation, stole from white people, too. It’s true that “That’s Alright,” the 1954 hit that began his life of fame and fortune, had been written by the black Mississippi Delta blues musician Arthur Crudup, who had previously recorded it to little notice. But the material Presley grabbed next was “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” by the father of bluegrass music, the mandolinist Bill Monroe. Thus did the Tupelo-born sensation enter show business in a doubly derivative way: While rhythm-and-blues radio stations across the South, Southwest, and middle of the United States were playing Presley’s “That’s Alright,” the country stations flooded the airwaves with his sexed-up rendition of “Blue Moon of Kentucky.”

The story of the “A” side and the “B” side of Elvis Presley’s Sun Records debut is told in Country Mu-
The 16-hour PBS documentary series that aired this fall. Whether you love this kind of music or can’t stand it, watching even a little of Ken Burns’s exhaustive and sometimes exhausting program will let you in on the fact that no American musical form would exist without its borrowers, blenders, adapters, revivers, and (in some cases) outright thieves. What we know as country music comes from gospel, blues, and Appalachian music. It coalesced in the 1930s, along with the nascent music industry, and it influenced what Americans listened to far beyond the mountains of Appalachia. As the songwriter Bobby Braddock puts it: “There was a saying: Blues had a baby, and they called it rock and roll. And I always said, yeah, and I think the daddy was the hillbilly.”

At times this creative cross-pollination raised hackles. Some in the audience at Nashville’s Grand Ole Opry, when Elvis took the stage and performed “Blue Moon of Kentucky,” complained that it was a travesty. On the other hand, songwriter Braddock describes a country tune that he co-wrote (“Golden Ring,” a hit for Tammy Wynette and George Jones in 1976) as sounding “like 10 or 12 gospel hymns thrown together.” This was a quality not many listeners would have picked up on; fans of both the sacred and the profane just knew they liked the duet.

Whether it raises hackles or not, all this mutual influencing crosses lines, be they racial, religious, socioeconomic, or political. But we don’t get dreary polemics on cultural appropriation from the black and biracial musicians who offer commentary here. Quite the opposite. “Music is always striving [toward] the best thing. And the best thing is a mix,” says Rhiannon Giddens. “That’s one of the reasons why American music has taken over the world: because everybody can feel that it comes from one plus one equals a hundred.”

The program stresses the black influence on country music, highlighting Hank Williams’s apprenticeship with a street musician in rural Alabama named Rufus Payne; the harmonica player DeFord Bailey’s participation in the Grand Ole Opry; and Johnny Cash’s friendship in Memphis with a jug-band player named Gus Cannon.

America was racially segregated, and so was radio. Whenever Americans spun the radio dial or walked into a record store, though, not everyone enjoying R&B was black and not everyone enjoying country was white. Episode Four covers the career of Ray Charles, and speaking about the Georgia-born pianist, Wynton Marsalis comments: “We tend to think of it one way—these white musicians heard these black musicians play. Black musicians were listening to the white musicians, too.” By 1962, Charles had been an R&B star for a decade. He earned the right to choose his own material and exercised it by making an album, Modern Sounds in Country and Western Music. The rendition it contains of Don Gibson’s “I Can’t Stop Loving You,” now a classic, won a Grammy for “best R&B release.”

The very term “rockabilly,” which was invented in producer Sam Phillips’s Sun Records storefront studio in Memphis, helps convey the hybridized and crossover nature of American music. “Texas swing” is the country version of the “big band” sound. Most Jimmie Rodgers and Hank Williams tunes swing, as do (in a more “contemporary jazz” way) many of the arrangements and vocal phrasings favored by Willie Nelson. Among the vast number of songs sampled in Burns’s documentary is Dolly Parton and Porter Wagoner’s rendition of “The Last Thing on My Mind,” a folk song by Greenwich Village habitué Tom Paxton.

“I Will Always Love You,” Whitney Houston’s 1992 pop blockbuster, was written by Parton in 1974 as her way of telling Wagoner that she was going solo. The voice of a caucasian hippie, Leon Russell, is heard as Episode Six opens; it is his
raw yet satisfying piano-pounding rendition of “Will the Circle Be Unbroken.”

As a mini-college of musical knowledge, the series offers more than feel-good moments about how music can bring us together. We learn who instituted the electric guitar in country-music combos (Ernest Tubb); who brought in the use of drums (the Louvin Brothers); who was Garrison Keillor’s prototype radio storyteller (Minnie Pearl of the Grand Ole Opry); and what gave the virtuoso bluegrass players their (to me) surprising enthusiasm for raiding the oeuvre of Bob Dylan. He went to Nashville to make several of his records. And Dylan's music was embraced by the legendary banjoist Earl Scruggs, who had grown friendly to the counterculture in the late 1960s upon being persuaded by his sons to oppose U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.

The history offered here inclines strongly toward the singer-songwriterish, as one might expect from public television. Burns and scriptwriter Dayton Duncan anoint as the true kings and queens of country those who authored their own material, or at least some of it. That would be people such as Rodgers, Williams, Parton, Nelson, Cash, and Jennings, along with Loretta Lynn, Buck Owens, Merle Haggard, Mel Tillis, and Roger Miller. We also hear about and from clever Nashville songwriters who did not have performing careers, such as Braddock, Harlan Howard, and Hank Cochran.

Also receiving major attention are those who came later but explicitly tied their work to their predecessors. Dwight Yoakam, Vince Gill, Emmylou Harris, and Ricky Scaggs built careers as respecters of roots music. They, along with long-hairs such as Kris Kristofferson, Townes Van Zandt, Gram Parsons, Rodney Crowell, and roots-revival groups including the New Lost City Ramblers and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, forged a more collegiate-oriented or folk-rock side of country music that widened its appeal. That side is heavily represented in the documentary, which follows country music up to the year 1996.

Young performers make their appearance, but only as interviewees about what happened before that point. That hipsters such as Giddens of the Carolina Chocolate Drops, Ketch Secor of Old Crow Medicine Show, and Jack White of the White Stripes would be so admireing of this music—Giddens even regales us with how much her black grandmother doted on the cornpone-filled television show Hee Haw—is cause for celebration. These “influencers” might just be able to impress upon younger Americans who watch this program that they need to calm down a little bit about cultural appropriation. To culturally appropriate is human, and if done by Hank Williams, close to divine.

Like, Emily Dickinson, Whatever

A strange, woke TV rendition of a great poet’s life

By A.M. Juster

"T"IS THE season for digging up and desecrating Emily Dickinson. First came last year’s Wild Nights with Emily, a flimsy film starring Saturday Night Live alum Molly Shannon, which the Washington Post said threatened “to reduce the writer’s life to the punchline of a literary version of Rodney Dangerfield.” Now the perpetrator is Apple TV’s 10 half-hour episodes of its strange new series, Dickinson.

Hailee Steinfeld, an executive producer of Dickinson, plays the lead role of the poet in her mid-twenties. Steinfeld physically resembles Dickinson, but there any resemblance ends. Dickinson is not so much a bloated biopic as a fictional reimagining of its subject as a woke millennial rebel; it is more in the vein of Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter than the acclaimed biopics about Johnny Cash, Elton John, and Freddy Mercury.

Given Dickinson’s famous injunction—“Tell all the truth but tell
it slant”—perhaps we should accept some of Apple TV’s liberties, but minutes into the first episode, it becomes clear that the show includes far too many heavy-handed deviations from the facts.

To create a platform for tedious virtue-signaling, creator Alena Smith misrepresents Emily’s parents as rigid enemies of education for women. Richard B. Sewall, Dickinson’s preeminent biographer, correctly describes Edward Dickinson as “a strenuous advocate of female education” who sent Emily to Amherst Academy, a top-notch prep school with many connections to their family. He then sent her for a year to Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, the predecessor to Mount Holyoke College; few American women of the 1850s received a better education than Emily Dickinson.

As wooden as the script is, Toby Huss finds ways to make the character of Edward Dickinson interesting and intermittently sympathetic. Poor Jane Krakowski, who plays Edward’s wife, Emily Norcross Dickinson, has no such luck because the script calls for her to play a borderline-psycho Happy Housewife; her lines are so leaden and repetitive that she often looks embarrassed. Again, this caricature is more than “slant”—the poet’s mother was herself educated at a boarding school, and her failures as a mother tended to derive from emotional aloofness rather than the hard-hearted smothering repeatedly portrayed in Dickinson.

The centerpiece of both the Molly Shannon film and this biopic is an alleged lesbian affair between the poet and her best friend, Susan Gilbert, who is in the process of becoming her sister-in-law. This part of the plot relies on controversial recent scholarship that overreads typically effusive correspondence of the 19th century. A few scholars have made similar efforts to claim Abraham Lincoln and other gushy letter writers of this era as retroactive members of the LGBT community.

In an apparent attempt to “normalize” the lesbian affair, Dickinson frames the Dickinson-Gilbert relationship with a millennial view of sexuality—everyone under 35 is having casual sex all the time, and everyone over that age has given up on sex. Scenes in Dickinson include young people involved in: semi-public masturbation, large parties where everyone suddenly French-kisses somebody else, pre-digital revenge porn, and under-the-table dinner-party orgasms, not to mention opium consumption and dancing with a six-foot hallucinatory insect.

The hip-hop score and the occasional surreal cinematography in the style of Baz Luhrmann only distract from the plot, but the slangy contemporary diction is even more distracting. When Emily started calling people “dude,” I wondered whether the producers had sought the help of the writers of the Harold and Kumar films to punch up the script.

Punched up or not, the script makes a catastrophic error by whitewashing religion from Dickinson’s life. Raised a Calvinist in a household that regularly prayed together at home, she did reject organized religion:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church
I keep it staying at home.

Her poems, which often have intense religious feeling and imagery, are wildly inconsistent when they consider God:

Faith—is the Pierless Bridge
Supporting what we see
Unto the Scene that We do not—

Of Course—I prayed—
And did God care?
He cared as much as on the Air
A Bird—had stamped her foot—
And cried “Give Me”—

Some attention to this tension in Dickinson’s psyche would have made her concise and gnomic verse, often written in the meter of hymns, more understandable to viewers.

Dickinson never decides whether it wants to be drama, history, comedy, or satire. Somewhat surprisingly, it is at its best when it tries to be funny. There is an amusing conversation about the 1856 Republicans and the Know Nothings that has a clear subtext for the present day without going over the top. Scenes involving Emily’s participation in a Shakespeare club also provide a platform for several deft shots at the pretensions of actors.

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Dickinson takes hard satirical shots at two famous authors, Louisa May Alcott and Henry David Thoreau. The one at Alcott is a miss by a mile. It portrays her at a Dickinson family dinner as robotic, graceless,
and greedy; she then goes for a weird “run” through the fields with Emily. My guess is that the writers’ intention was to mock what millennial academics call “late capitalism” a century and a half too soon, but it is difficult to tell.

Perhaps the highlight of the 10 episodes occurs when Emily and a failed suitor go to Walden Pond to try to get Thoreau’s help for their campaign to stop the cutting of a tree for a new railroad line. As played by John Mulaney, the hypocrisy of the pampered man of “the wilderness” is hilarious, and not in the least unfair.

Sometimes the show is unintentionally funny. The relentless selfishness of its Emily wears on the viewer. Toward the end of the 10 episodes, the writers decided to address this problem by having minor characters who are people of color improbably remind Emily of the privileges of wealth. The actors playing these characters, who are quite talented, look almost as pained in these scenes as those in which Emily’s mother keeps insisting that housework is the only appropriate occupation for a woman.

The last line of defense for biographies this dreadful tends to be that, even if they get the details wrong, they stir interest in the main character. In the case of Dickinson, though, the blending of the fictional and the true is so thorough that it may continue to confuse students who want to understand a great national poet. That is a shame.

Richard B. Sewall aptly summarized the dilemma of those who want to understand Emily Dickinson:

Almost nothing to do with Emily Dickinson is simple and clear-cut....Seemingly with willful cunning and surely with an artist’s skill, she avoided direct answers to the major questions that anyone interested in her as poet or person might be moved to ask. With success seldom approached by one destined for literary fame, she kept her private life private.

Any fair look at the evidence we do have about Emily Dickinson's personal life suggests that she had the same sort of chronically unresolved internal conflicts that she had in her religious life. For all her feisty resistance to young men who courted her in her teens and twenties, she later encouraged romantic pursuit by a series of older—and mostly literary—men. In some of her surviving correspondence (her sister Lavinia destroyed most of it after Emily's death), more traditional aspects of her personality emerge, particularly in letters in which she submissively addresses an unknown man as “Master.”

If one encounters viewers of Dickinson fired up to learn more about Emily Dickinson, you can be quick to dismiss Apple TV's Dickinson as a Hollywood fever dream. For those in search of the real Emily Dickinson, tell them the best place to start is Sewall's well-written and meticulous 1974 work, The Life of Emily Dickinson.

Even more important than Sewall's biography are the poems themselves, which a series of editors butchered in order to domesticate Dickinson's unruly and often unsettling art. Fortunately, Cristanne Miller has assembled Emily Dickinson's verse as it was originally written in her monumental Emily Dickinson's Poems: As She Preserved Them (Harvard University Press 2016). Anyone serious about understanding Dickinson should not settle for any other collection of her work.

Dickinson is a pandering distortion of the life of America's most important 19th-century poet, and thus viewers should be careful to treat it for what it is—an intermittently amusing cartoon driven by trendy ideology, and not a serious appreciation of Emily Dickinson's poetry or life.
in his University of Virginia college yearbook, all the storylines got crisscrossed and tangled up. On the one hand, blackface is irredeemably racist. On the other hand, Ralph Northam is a Virginia Democrat. On the third hand, his lieutenant next-in-line has a complicated #metoo problem. On the fourth hand, maybe if we just sit quietly and hold very still, this will all blow over.

The fourth hand was the winning hand, and Ralph Northam remains the Democrat in charge of an even bluer Commonwealth of Virginia. But it was a close call.

RuPaul, the impresario of the cult-hit TV show, RuPaul’s Drag Race, would seem to have impeccable cultural credentials and an ironclad Get Out of Woke Jail Free card, but as the intersections of intersectionality get more complicated and overlapping, even RuPaul has been tripped up. The use of the word “tranny” to describe transsexuals was, a few years ago, perfectly okay. Now it’s an unacceptable slur, though RuPaul was late to realize it. The drag icon was attacked for using the word—and for defending its use—but that was nothing compared with the controversy that erupted when the television host suggested that performers who are undergoing sex reassignment therapy—hormones and surgery, essentially—would probably be disqualified from future Drag Race seasons.

“You can identify as a woman and say you’re transitioning, but it changes once you start changing your body,” RuPaul said. “It takes on a different thing; it changes the whole concept of what we’re doing.”

That sentence may seem reasonable to some people, or at least the kind of people who understand all of those newly minted phrases. But it did not seem reasonable to a lot of people in the intersection of transgender rights, gay rights, queer theory, and gender fluidity, which are words I have randomly placed into the sentence to seem extremely up-to-date but do not entirely understand. They demanded—and got—an apology from RuPaul, from the person who more than anyone has made drag culture and transgendered performers mainstream stars, but who apparently still has a lot to learn.

Before we continue, I would like to draw your attention to the way I have masterfully avoided using any gender-based pronoun to describe RuPaul. Selecting the correct pronoun to describe a complicated figure like RuPaul is a minefield that has felled many middle-aged white men, and I’m proud that I have made it safely to the other side. It required a few tortured sentence constructions, but I think you have to admit it’s was a pretty sweet move on my part. Just because I am a fat target doesn’t mean I have to make it easy. If I just lie very still and make no sudden movements, they’ll continue going after their own.

And they will. Prediction: At some point in the future, somewhere near the intersection of RuPaul’s Drag Race and Ralph Northam’s blackface, it will occur to someone in the feminist community that drag is, when you get right down to it, blackface for girls. Men dressing up as extreme versions of “the oppressed other,” with elaborate makeup and more than a hint of cruel disdain for their subjects—where, exactly, is the distinction that makes one of these performance types culturally celebrated and television-show-worthy and the other a reason to recall a politician from office?

The radical feminists are already gearing up for battle. The specificity of the female sex—i.e., vaginas and stuff—is central to the feminist perspective. Trans-Exclusive Radical Feminists—or “Terfs,” as they style themselves—are right now sounding the alarms about transwomen (that is, women who used to be men and who in many cases still have male, um, attributes) claiming all sorts of traditionally feminist prerogatives. Unless you were born and raised as a female, the Terfs (reasonably, in my view) assert, you can’t really speak to the feminist experience. Gender is a construct, reply the transfolk. A baby with a penis is just a baby with a penis, it can be a girl baby or a boy baby or maybe some new kind of baby we haven’t thought of yet. Terfs, according to their trans opponents, are just privileged white lesbians with tenure.

All of this means that it is inevitable that the intersection of race, sex, trans, and class—the Four Highways of the American Intersectional Left—are about to collide. Maybe that’s why they call it intersectionality. People who hang out in intersections often get hit by trucks.

Notice who is absent from all of these bitter battles and career-ending wildfires? That’s right—me! I’m just here writing inoffensive jokes, minding my own business. Call me when the shootin’ is over.

Commentary
BACK BEFORE a person could get in real trouble for this kind of thing, I wrote the following joke for a comedy series I was producing:

The character that everyone loved to hate, the objectionable, amoral voice of the comic ensemble—every sitcom has one—is holding forth on the benefits of becoming an older and more emotionally mature male. “There’s a point,” he says, “when a guy gets tired of dating and one-night stands and short-term relationships and running away from commitment. And when that time comes, when you’re ready for the love and the caring and the sharing of a real long-term relationship, you do the mature thing and fly to the Philippines and buy yourself a wife.”

It wasn’t a killer laugh, I admit. But it was a fun on-the-way kind of joke, and because it came out of the mouth of the “bad” character in the series, we didn’t think twice—nor did the network—about sending it through the pipes and onto television screens nationwide.

The Media Action Network for Asian Americans, as you might expect from its name, did not take such a sanguine attitude toward the joke.

After about a page and a half of energetic reprimands, the How-dare-you? letter from the executive director of the organization wrapped up with this specific and stinging slap: “For your information,” he concluded, “the Philippine government outlawed mail-order brides in the early 1990s.”

For the record, the episode was broadcast in early 1995. So we were 18 months, at most, too late. Had we merely fiddled with the production schedule and raced the episode through the post-production process, it’s quite possible the episode would have aired weeks before the Fidel Ramos administration signed the relevant legislation, and the Media Action Network for Asian Americans would have been standing on wobbly ground.

Of course, this was a long time ago, before a simple joke could mushroom into a major cultural battle leaving careers and reputations in smoking piles along the war ground. In other words, I got away with it. Had I written the joke anytime in the past two years, I’d be out and gone, career over. I’d probably be writing these words during my union-mandated break from my job at a San Gabriel Valley Quizno’s Subs where I would not be known as the Hate-Speaking Former Television Writer, but rather the Sad Old Guy with the Baggies on His Hands Making My Turkey and Cheese. But that’s a whopping counterfactual, because I assure you there is no possible way I would write that joke these days, like, zero chance. Because I know that the Media Action Network for Asian Americans—and every other similar group—has a much bigger megaphone and a lot more power. And I also know that I am a privileged middle-aged white guy and I have a giant bull’s-eye on my back.

And, in a way, my acute sensitivity to my privilege and my status as a Fat Target keeps me safely tucked away, head down over my keyboard, out of range. When you know they’re out hunting for you and your kind, you tend to keep out of sight.

In 2019, it’s when you’re safe—or, when you think you’re safe—that you get into trouble. When Ralph Northam was elected Democratic governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia, the prevailing narrative among media pundits and news outlets was that this was an indication of the new, blue-state liberal Virginia. So when a little while later it was revealed that he appeared in blackface

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

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Two-State Solution Still Possible?

While sympathy for Palestinian self-rule is understandable, proponents of the two-state solution must resolve seven tough questions before it can be realistic.

The two-state solution—one for Palestinian Arabs, one for Israel, living side by side in peace and security—has long been an inviolable principle for both the U.S. and Israel. But today, intractable obstacles make two states seem more a dangerous fantasy than a viable alternative.

What are the facts?

Hope of Palestinian independence by the United States and Israel has since 2000 produced three offers of a Palestinian state in up to 97% of Judea-Samaria (the West Bank), including a capital in Jerusalem. But profound changes in the region—and persistent Arab rejection of these offers—make a Palestinian state threatening to Israel and the entire region. Until we can resolve these thorny questions, two states can’t yet be considered a solution:

1. When will Palestinian Arabs recognize Israel as the national home of the Jewish people? For 71 years, the Arabs have steadfastly refused to accept the Jewish state—preserving the hope that someday the Jews will be driven from the Holy Land. Indeed, according to a recent poll, 57% of Palestinians believe their main national goal should be a one-state solution, reclaiming all of historic Palestine from the river to the sea. Should Westerners insist on something most Palestinians don’t want?

2. When will the two warring Palestinian factions—Hamas and Fatah—reconcile? Ever since Hamas, the Muslim terror group, won Palestinian elections in 2006 and then violently seized Gaza, it has waged war with the ruling Fatah party in the West Bank. Not only are Gaza and the West Bank separated geographically, but for 13 years these two factions have fought bitterly, despite their peace efforts and those of other Arab nations. Until Fatah and Hamas declare peace, Israel has no negotiating partner.

3. When will Hamas retract its sworn mission to destroy Israel? Hamas controls Gaza and is today allied with Iran—both of which advocate Israel’s destruction and spend tens of millions of dollars supporting anti-Israel terror attacks. How can Israel achieve security when the Hamas charter and its every action focus on eliminating the Jewish state by military force?

4. When will the Palestinians hold national elections? Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was elected to a four-year term in 2005. He has now served 14 years without standing for election, and neither Palestinians in Judea-Samaria nor Gaza have held national elections since 2006—they are totalitarian entities. Will creating a new Arab dictatorship help create peace?

5. When will the Palestinians create a self-sustaining economy? While the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas have received billions of dollars in aid from the U.S., the European Union and Arab states, neither group has invested in infrastructure sufficient to create viable economies. Unemployment in the West Bank is 18%; it’s 52% in Gaza. Without massive international welfare, both entities would collapse.

6. What would prevent terrorist Hamas from conquering a new Palestinian state? Hamas clearly has superior military might: It violently took over Gaza in 2007, today has 20,000 men under arms and commands tens of thousands of rockets. It also has a well-organized political arm and is supported financially by Iran. If a Palestinian state were formed under the Palestinian Authority, how could the U.S., Israel, Jordan and Egypt protect the new state from a coup by Islamist Hamas terrorists?

Major obstacles currently make the two-state solution untenable.

7. When will the Palestinians institute political freedoms and rule of law? Like many Middle East dictatorships, neither Palestinian “governments” support civil rights or rule of law. The U.N. Special Coordinator has reported that in Palestinian jurisdictions, “conditions for rule of law” are non-existent. Human Rights Watch reports that the PA is “arresting, abusing and criminally charging journalists who express peaceful criticism.” Civilian security in both territories is completely outside of civilian control.

At one time, a two-state solution seemed reasonable—before the Palestinians turned down generous peace offers by Israel in 2000, 2001 and 2008, before Hamas seized Gaza and launched three wars against Israel, before Iran blossomed into a regional cancer, before the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars, before ISIS and al Qaeda, and before 14 years of corrupt rule by Mahmoud Abbas. Until major problems are resolved, the two-state solution seems at best indefensible—and, worse, irresponsible and dangerous.

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